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KOMBAT VS DC UNIVERSE

Batman vs. Sub-Zero
Superman vs. Scorpion
Flash vs. Sonya Blade

16 PREVIEWS!

- » LORD OF THE RINGS: CONQUEST
- » TOMB RAIDER UNDERWORLD
- » ALONE IN THE DARK

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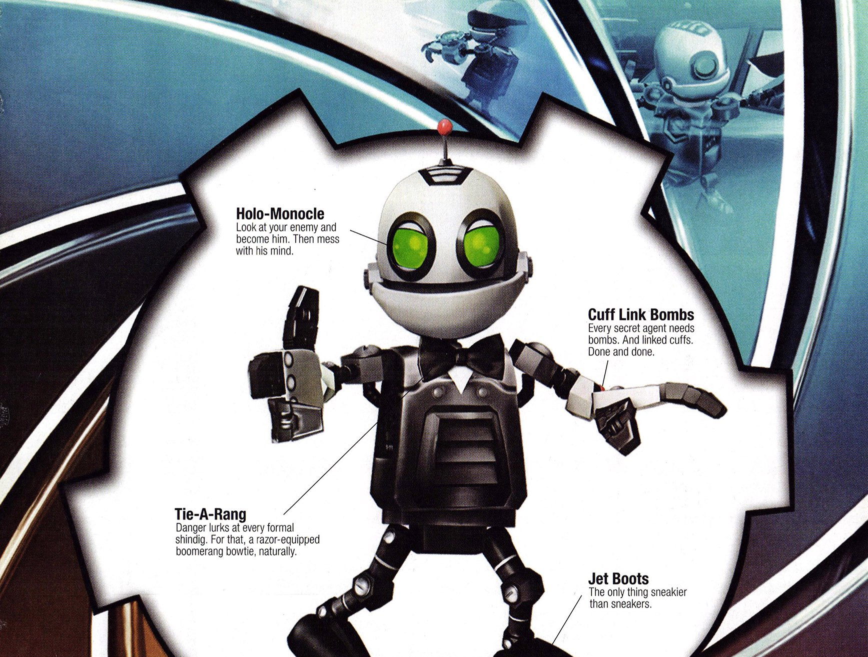

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Tobacco Reference

ONLY ON
PSP
PlayStation Portable

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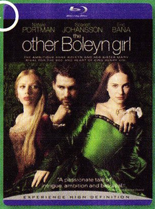
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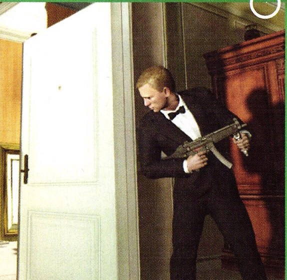
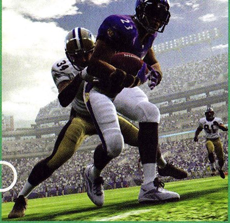


"You spin me right round, baby, right round."



"I told you to tuck your shirt in!"

"Honey, the Eiffel Tower will be open again tomorrow. Please, for the love of God, slow down!"

Now, with an extra long cord, for those days when you need to sit 50 bazillion feet away from your *handheld*.

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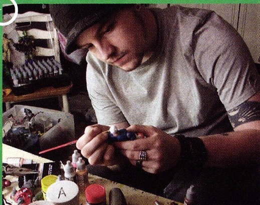
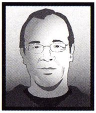
"For the last time—no! They're NOT dolls!"



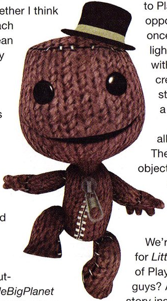


Editor's Note

"You can't give the enemy a break. Send him to hell"

As I wrapped up writing this month's cover story chronicling the progress of *LittleBigPlanet,* I typed the words, "the most important game releasing on PlayStation 3 this year." And then I paused. For quite a while. That seemed initially to be overtly bold, and though I tempered it eventually with a "probably," that wasn't so much of wussing out on the statement as it was uncertainty as to whether I'd forgotten something really, really important that would come back and bite my prognostication in its you-know-what.

What I dredged up during that long pause—if you're at all interested—was that if *LittleBigPlanet* succeeds like its creativity and style deserve, then it has the potential to bring gamers (and more critically, non-gamers) to the PlayStation 3. I've been asked a surprising number of times whether I think the game is a system seller; each time I've said, "No." What I mean is that I really believe that every PS3 owner will try *LBP,* play the "single-" player experience, download the demo, and discover the core fun of its co-operative play format. But how many will buy a PS3 for this game?



Where it flips to being a system seller is when the community creativity takes off and expands the options and introduces "levels" that aren't really levels in the platforming, puzzling sense as we currently understand them. Here's a shout-out: who's with me in using *LittleBigPlanet* to tell the story of *The Iliad?* Seriously. As a Classics major in college (yes kids, you too can run a videogame magazine with a college degree that has nothing to do with journalism, English, communications, or any of those other counselor-advised tracks) I read Homer in the original Greek and feel that *LBP* has the flexibility to tell that story. Really, I'm not kidding. Educational uses. Photo galleries (Mark Healey, creative director at Media Molecule, is taking photos of his new kid and posting them in a level as an interactive photo storyboard of the young fella's life.) Interactive marketing and advertising. Classic game recreation (who's first to bring Nintendo's *Mario* gameplay to PlayStation 3 through *LBP?)* The opportunities are so open-ended that once you get over the deer-in-headlights impact of facing a blank canvas, with the weight of being funny and creative causing brain farts and blank stares, this "game" release could be a system-defining event.

> "Here's a shout-out: who's with me in using *LittleBigPlanet* to tell the story of *The Iliad?*"

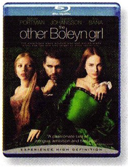
Or the complexity could freeze all but the most hardcore groups. The grief system and potential of objectionable material could turn off potential "casual" users and content devourers. The potential could wither on the vine of its own creativity.

We're devoutly behind the potential for *LittleBigPlanet* to broaden the reach of PlayStation 3. But what about you guys? After reading this month's cover story insight into what you might be able to achieve, what do you think? Let me know at the usual address.

Rob

"Quote" contest

Enter to win a Blu-ray movie! Unless you're a first time reader (in which case, welcome) you should know that the headline at the top of this column is a quote from a movie. Identify the movie, send your answer (along with your name and shipping address) to **PTOM_editor@futureus.com** with Ed Note August in the subject line. I'll pick one lucky winner at random to receive a Blu-ray movie. I'll be sending one out to Justin Houterman of Rolling Hill Estates, CA who identified the quote last issue from, yes, it really was, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.*



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EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTORS **Jason D'Aprile, Andrew Hayward, Chris Hudak, Tyler Nagata, Mikel Reparaz, Joe Rybicki, Greg Sewart**
INTERN **Carlos Ruiz**

ART
ART DIRECTOR **Ken Bousquet**
DESIGN CONTRIBUTORS **Katrin Auch, Eugene Wang**

BUSINESS
PUBLISHER **Daniel Morris**
dmorris@futureus.com
ADVERTISING DIRECTOR - GAMES GROUP **Nate Hunt**
562-983-8004, nhunt@futureus.com
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR (Bay Area) **Christina Grushkin**
650-238-2504, cgrushkin@futureus.com
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR (South West) **Isaac Ugay**
949-218-0981, lugay@futureus.com
ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE **Benjamin Alessio**
650-238-2324, balessio@futureus.com
DIRECTOR, CORPORATE SALES & MARKETING **Jim Schiekofer**
646-723-5410, jschiekofer@futureus.com
CORP. SALES MIDWEST MANAGER **Jodi Sosna**
212-217-1358, jsosna@futureus.com
CORP. SALES WEST MANAGER **Nadine Weiss**
310-424-2254, nweiss@futureus.com
WEST COAST ACCOUNT MANAGER **Rachel Campos**
650-745-9207, rcampos@futureus.com
AD PROJECT MANAGER **Rhoda Ushijima**
650-238-2474, rushijima@futureus.com
ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE **Arthur St. Germain**
650-238-2571, astgermaine@futureus.com
ADVERTISING COORDINATOR **Heidi Hapin**
650-238-2475, hhapin@futureus.com
MARKETING MANAGER **Andrea Recio-Ang**
arecio-ang@futureus.com
DIRECT MARKETING SPECIALIST **Alexandra Davydova**

PRODUCTION
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR **Richie Lesovoy**
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR **Larry Briseno**

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PRESIDENT **Jonathan Simpson-Bint**
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FUTURE PLC
30 Monmouth St., Bath, Avon, BA1 2BW, England
Tel +44 1225 442244
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NON-EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN: Roger Parry
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PlayStation: The Official Magazine Customer Care
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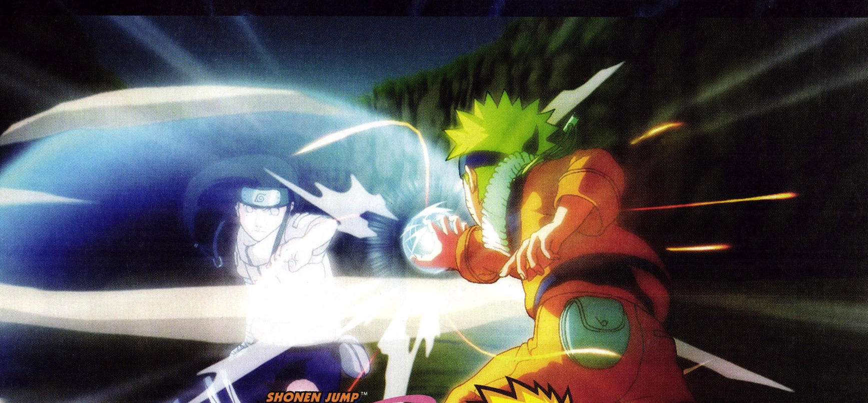

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PLAYSTATION 3

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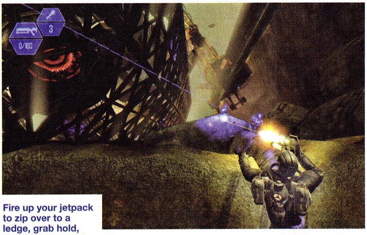
DEPT. OF GLOBAL RELATIONS

WESTERN EXPANSION

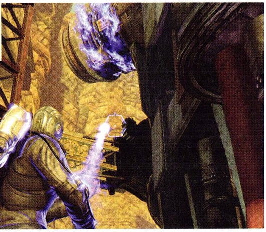
Fan-favorite publisher Capcom looks outside of Japan for its next wave of games

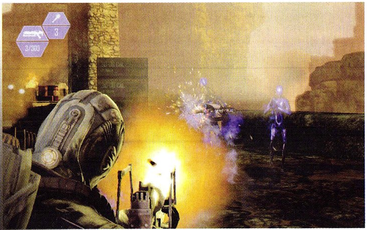
When it comes to third-party developers, few companies are as revered as Capcom. With an overstuffed stable of mega-franchises—including *Street Fighter, Resident Evil,* and *Devil May Cry*—Capcom has created a brand that resonates with hardcore and mainstream gamers alike. Sure, there've been clunkers along the way (anyone remember *Auto Modellista?),* but for the most part Capcom has burnished its brand with a unique Japanese style of gameplay that crosses over from Mega Man to Chris Redfield.

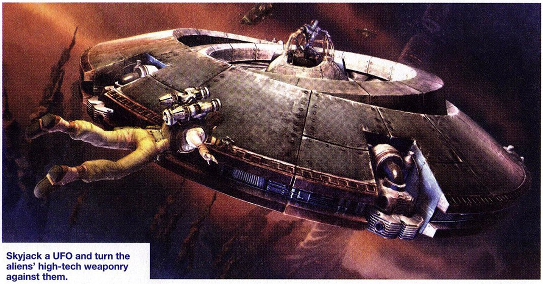
But something strange is afoot in Osaka, Japan. Instead of developing their latest franchises with their in-house studios and producers, Capcom is looking to the West for their next wave, starting with sci-fi shooter *Dark Void*. Wait—what gives? With all that internal development talent, why look elsewhere?



Fire up your jetpack to zip over to a ledge, grab hold, then blast away at enemies above and below you using Dark Void's innovative "vertical cover combat" system.







Skyjack a UFO and turn the aliens' high-tech weaponry against them.

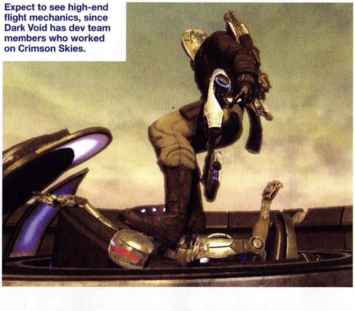
"Capcom created a new group of people in the U.S., and they have the mission of working more closely with Western developers and bringing more Western content to the market," explains Ed Fries, the head of the newly formed studio Airtight Games, which is developing *Dark Void* for Capcom. "They want this group to be somewhat independent. We're actually the first console title that they signed."

Some of you might recognize Fries as the erstwhile VP of Game Publishing at Microsoft. Now developing games for all platforms, Fries has taken his former Xbox fervor and replaced it with genuine enthusiasm for Capcom. "Japan is a resource we can tap into," he gushes, "and we have, because it's a *great* resource."

So what brought about this change? "*Dead Rising, Lost Planet,* both of those games did better here than anywhere," notes Kraig Kujawa, Capcom's U.S. director of design. "They know the Western market is growing. They also know that even though they have those successes, in order to grow they're going to have to bring in some Western developers who understand the nuances of the Western market."

One thing's for sure: There's no mistaking *Dark Void* for a Japanese game. Starring a pilot named Will who finds himself in a parallel universe after crashing within the Bermuda Triangle, the game is a familiar mix of third-person gunplay, aerial combat, and story-driven adventure—with a few twists. The biggest innovation comes via the "vertical cover combat," a vertigo-inducing 90-degree spin on the standard shooter setup that will have Will dangling from cliffs as he blasts away at aliens from above and below. Also intriguing is the game's use of a rocket pack, which our hero will acquire about a third of the way in, allowing him to take multiple routes through a level. Sounds awfully Western to us, though—which makes us wonder: Will *Dark Void* be able to deliver that unique "Capcom feel"?

Kujawa is confident that the team will pull it off. For one, Kujawa points out that *Dark Void* is very character-driven, something that Capcom prides itself on. And then there are the bosses. When Kujawa showed Keiji Inafune, head of Research and Development at Capcom, the game's "Archon" boss, Inafune apparently told him that "this is the first boss from a Western developer that actually feels like it came from a Japanese developer." High praise, indeed. Still, the team has a daunting task ahead of them. "It's scary because it's new, because it's unique," Kujawa says. "But the scariest thing to us is, we just want to make an awesome game. We've proved that we can work together to come up with something great on Western soil, from Western developers, with a Capcom feel. And if we make an awesome game, it's all good."



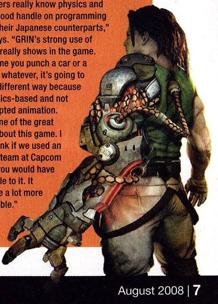
Expect to see high-end flight mechanics, since Dark Void has dev team members who worked on Crimson Skies.

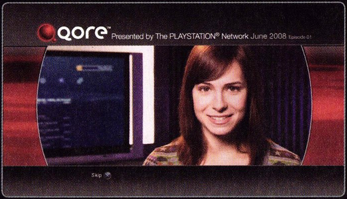
Swedish Swingers

Capcom isn't just looking to the West for new franchises. They're also turning over their classic franchises to Western developers—although in the case of *Bionic Commando,* the series isn't considered quite so classic on its home turf. "When I presented it internally, the Japanese laughed me out of the room several times, because it was not successful in Japan," says producer Ben Judd. Undaunted, Judd pressed ahead, eventually getting the green light to develop an all-new 3D version of the hardcore gem. But it wasn't just Judd's personal passion for *Bionic Commando* that kept him going; he also cites, well...us for spurring him on. "I'd come to a lot of different events and afterward we'd drink with the press and we'd ask, 'What Capcom games do you wish we'd remake?' And many people mentioned *Bionic Commando.* So I got the idea in my head: We really should make a *Bionic Commando* game. A lot of people really like it; it's not just me that likes it."

Judd took his time finding the right team for the game, eventually settling on Swedish studio GRIN. Was he nervous at all about turning over the key to his favorite franchise to a non-Japanese developer? "I shouldn't admit this, but I've always been enamored with Japanese design, the art style, the quality you get with a Japanese game, so even I had my doubts about using a Western developer in the beginning," he concedes. However, Judd was quickly won over when he saw the team's work on *Ghost Recon* for the PC, along with the team's dedication to studying and understanding every detail of the original *Bionic Commando.*

At a recent viewing of the game, we were notably impressed with the amount of interactivity in every level. "Western developers really know physics and have a good handle on programming versus their Japanese counterparts," Judd says. "GRIN's strong use of physics really shows in the game. Every time you punch a car or a block or whatever, it's going to react a different way because it's physics-based and not pre-scripted animation. That's one of the great things about this game. I don't think if we used an internal team at Capcom Japan, you would have that angle to it. It would be a lot more predictable."

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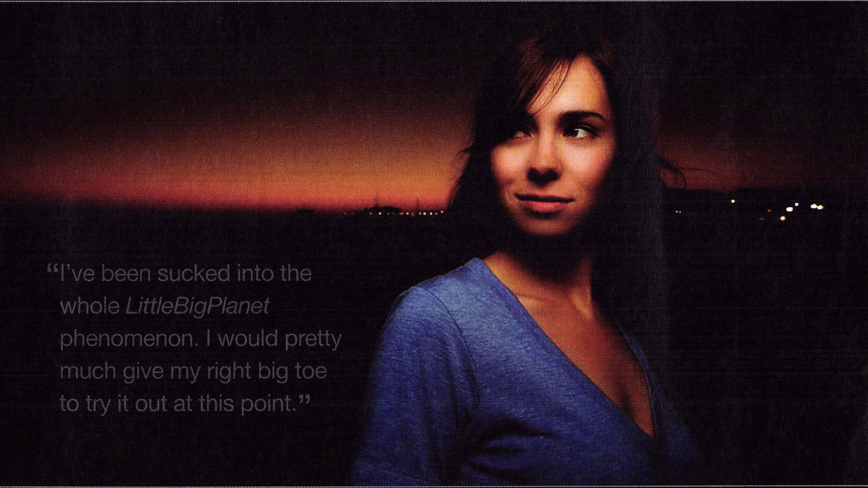
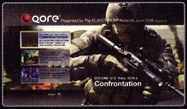


"I've been sucked into the whole *LittleBigPlanet* phenomenon. I would pretty much give my right big toe to try it out at this point."

Qore Presented by The PLAYSTATION® Network June 2008
Guitar Hero Aerosmith

Qore Presented by The PLAYSTATION® Network June 2008
Secret Agent Clank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CONFRONTATION
SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs
Confrontation

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Star Wars:
The Force Unleashed

The next Star Wars movie is a game. This game. Force grip and throw TIE Fighters and uncover galaxy-shaking secrets in a critical role as Darth Vader's secret apprentice.

VERONICA BELMONT

The host of PlayStation Network's new Qore chats about what fans can expect from the new downloadable episodes.

Just announced, and now available for download from the PlayStation Store (for $2.99, or $24.99 for a 13-episode subscription, which includes *Calling All Cars* as a bonus), is a whole new way of seeing, in action, some of the exciting games heading to PlayStation 3 and PSP in the months ahead. As the first episode of Qore: Presented by the PlayStation Network goes live, we talk to Veronica Belmont, host of the show, about the project, and what we can expect to see.

PTOM: Qore: We've heard the name, but what exactly is it?
VB: Qore is interactive gaming programming. Each episode will have video features on a few different games for the PS3 and PSP, as well as downloadable content like demos, invitations to game betas, game and Blu-ray trailers, themes, and some other surprises. You can download Qore right from the PlayStation Store, either by single episode or as a 13-episode subscription.

Qore: How did you get involved in the project, and what were you doing before Qore took over your life?
I've been working in the tech industry since graduating from college. My first job after moving West was as an audio producer and video editor at CNET, which is where I began working on my first podcast, Buzz Out Loud. I started two other podcasts there, and also did how-to videos for CNET TV.

This past year I hosted a more general interest show called Mahalo Daily, and recently I became the co-host of Tekzilla (a tech how-to show) on the online TV network, Revision3.

I know a few of the folks over at PC Gamer (I wrote the *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King* preview for them a few months ago) and so I guess word got around that I was a game-loving geek that did video!

I became involved with Qore as we were wrapping up our shoot schedule for episode 01, which is why there isn't too much of me in the first episode!

Tell us about the first episode. What can viewers expect?
It's a great introductory episode, with tons of great content. Our featured game is *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Confrontation,* and we also have features on *Secret Agent Clank, Afro Samurai, Soulcalibur IV,* and *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed.*

Do you have any particular goals or ambitions through the project: places you've always wanted to go, developers you desperately want to quiz, or games you can't wait to see?
I love Japan, and I was fortunate to be able to cover the Tokyo Game Show last year; I'm definitely looking forward to heading back there sometime soon! I love traveling, so I'm excited about visiting developers all over the world. As far as upcoming games go, I've been sucked into the whole *LittleBigPlanet* phenomenon. I would pretty much give my right big toe to try it out at this point.

What kind of content can we expect in Qore each month? Will you be revealing details of firmware updates, feature and function additions (including for PSP), or is the focus purely on games?
The focus is definitely going to be on the actual games and the people and tech behind them. I mean if something really important is happening in the thrilling realm of firmware updates, I'm sure we could make an exception!

And as a sneak at the months ahead, can you tease us with any of the reveals and unveilings you'll be doing in episodes two, three, or beyond?
I know we're planning a huge trip overseas to the U.K., so you can start wracking your brain for some announcements that could potentially come out of there! Oh yeah, there's also a video we shot involving motion capture suits, which quite frankly are far more comfortable than they appear. I'll just say that I make an excellent alien-like being from an alternate version of history.

What's your craziest and/or oddest fan story?
One time when I was at CNET, I mentioned on the podcast that I loved bacon. A couple of weeks later I received a care package full of bacon-related products: a tank top with a picture of bacon strips on it, bacon-flavored chocolate, strawberry gummy candy that looked like bacon, bacon strip Band-Aids, wrapping paper, a bacon-scented air freshener... yeah, I could keep going. I never knew there were so many bacon-themed products out there!

Just so we can get to know you a bit better: what's your favorite game of all-time? Television show? And movie?
I hate answering this kind of question, because you can never win. My favorite all-time game is *World of Warcraft.* I help run one of the largest guilds in the game (seriously) and we have a total blast. Otherwise, I'm spending my non-*WoW* time in *GTA4,* and I'm currently testing out the Creature Creator for *Spore.*

As for TV, I'm heavily obsessed with *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost,* but I also love pretty much anything on the Discovery Channel like *Mythbusters* and *Dirty Jobs. No Reservations with Anthony Bourdain* is great too, but mostly because I like to live vicariously though his brave eating adventures.

Favorite movie? That's another tough one. I'd have to say *Boondock Saints.* I have an autographed copy of the script by the director Troy Duffy that I bought for myself on my birthday one year.

You want to reveal any secrets about Qore?
Secrets? Hmm...no secrets. But I do have a warning! Never, ever, under any circumstance, hit L2.

Veronica Belmont 411

AGE:
25

EDUCATION:
Emerson College, Audio/Radio Production and New Media Studies

GAME THAT GOT YOU GAMING:
Anything on NES in the early days. First true addiction: *SimCity.*

WOW, LIKE, WOW:
2nd highest-ranking officer in Alea Iacta Est on Earthen Ring. Guild members include Curt Schilling, Andy Belford of Second Skin, and podcasters Scott Johnson and Randy Jordan of The Instance (among literally thousands of others).

AWARDS WON:
Violet Blue's Sexiest Geek of 2007

SKIN PICK:
I had my MacBook Pro laser-etched with a graphic by Kozyndan, so it would probably have to be one of their designs as well!

> "I never knew there were so many bacon-themed products out there!"

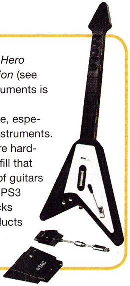
Photograph by Lan Bui

STRENGTH
SOUL CALIBUR IV

PlayStation Digest

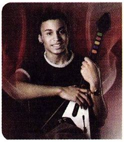
Top Stories, Industry Bits, and Oddities

The Six Degrees of

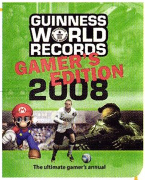


IF THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF DRUMS AND VOCALS for *Guitar Hero World Tour* (see page 28) and Konami's unveiling of *Rock Revolution* (see page 32) are any indication, the appeal of banging on plastic instruments is still going strong—and, still lucrative.

So of course third-party peripheral creators want a piece of the pie, especially when they observe the incompatibilities among first-party instruments. The Ant Commandos (TAC for short, named such because ants are hardworking and the company aspires to be, too) have stepped up to fill that need with a full range of multi-game products, including a series of guitars (like the wireless 10-button Double Range V3), a universal PS2 to PS3 adapter (for your PS2 guitars), and our personal favorite, drumsticks that glow. Check www.theantcommandos.com to ensure the products work for your particular game and system.



WHEN A SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD earns a spot in the *Guinness World Records Gamer's Edition* for being able to earn 880,920 points (97% accuracy, 1,107 note streak) in "Through the Fire and Flames" on expert level in *Guitar Hero III,* we're impressed. When that same gamer then goes on to sign an exclusive, long-term deal as spokesperson for The Ant Commandos (at sixteen!), we're jealous. But that's exactly what happened to Chris Chike, a Minnesota teenager. He'll soon be working with TAC to design a controller aimed toward hardcore players. We're proud that games have helped Chris earn a living at such a young age, but his story does remind us an awful lot of the *Guitar Hero*-related *South Park* episode. We're waiting with bated breath for him to hit one million points!



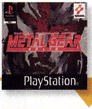
SPEAKING OF the *Guinness World Records Gamer's Edition...* Are games and gamers finally getting the attention they deserve? This special edition of the prestigious series targets games and their achievements. Part of the book details some of gaming history's greatest franchises and accomplishments. The rest is dedicated to feats gamers have achieved.

Interested in setting your own records? You'll need to sign a written agreement with the book's publishers beforehand, enlist witnesses to watch you perform the feat, and then document the event to serve as hard evidence. For full rules and regulations, visit http://gamers.guinnessworldrecords.com, then email us to let us know what crazy, gamer stunt you're attempting!

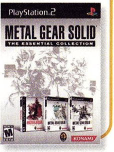
PlayStation News

WE DON'T OFTEN TOUT game-related books, but we're doing it twice in a row this time because we feel the *Metal Gear Solid* novel deserves to be noticed. Written by Raymond Benson (who also authored some James Bond and Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell* novels), this book tells the story of the original PlayStation *MGS* title. A great buy for those who want to learn the full story without playing the game. (Though why would anyone want to do that?)

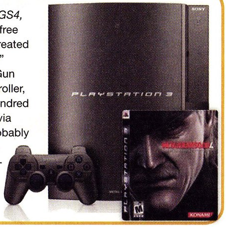
METAL GEAR SOLI
RAYMOND BENSON


METAL GEAR
PlayStation

PlayStation
METAL GEAR

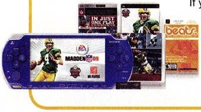

PlayStation 2
METAL GEAR SOLID
THE ESSENTIAL COLLECTION
KONAMI

DON'T FORGET: You can pick up a copy of *MGS4,* an 80GB PS3, a DualShock 3 controller, and a free voucher to get *PAIN* via PSN in a $499 Sony-created bundle. Alternately, there's a "very, very limited" Konami-backed bundle that includes a 40GB Gun Metal Gray PS3, a matching DualShock 3 controller, and a Limited Edition version of *MGS4* for a hundred bucks more. The gray bundle is only available via Konami's website. Due to its scarcity, you'll probably only be able to obtain one on eBay by the time you read this. Is a paint job worth an extra hundred bucks? Only you can say. But regardless of your choice, you must play *MGS4!*

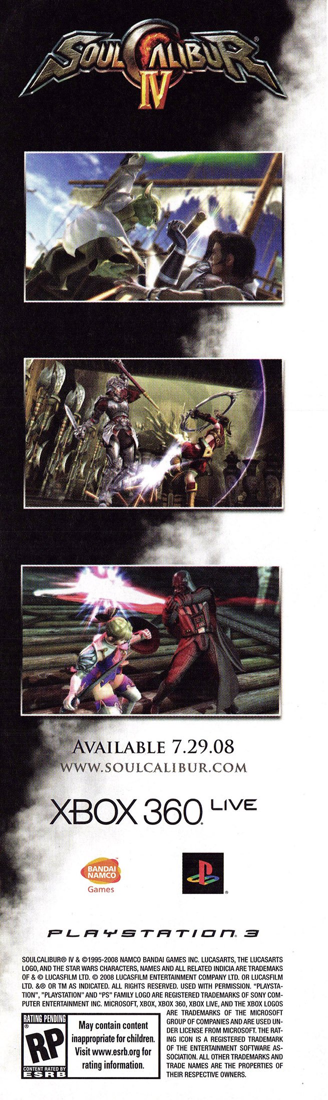

SONY
PLAYSTATION 3
KONAMI

BY THE TIME THIS ISSUE reaches your hands, the *God of War* PSP bundle should be on store shelves. This $199 collection contains a rich, vibrant (you could even say "bloody") red PSP slim with Kratos's angry mug on the back, a copy of *God of War: Chains of Olympus,* a UMD of *Superbad,* and a voucher to download *Syphon Filter: Combat Ops* from the PC PlayStation Store.

If you're not a *God of War* fan (or if you don't like red), come August 12th you can pick up the *Madden* bundle instead. It'll include a metallic blue PSP slim, a copy of *Madden NFL 09,* a UMD of *NFL: In Just One Play,* a voucher for *Beats,* and a 1GB Memory Stick for $199. If you've been waiting for a good PSP deal, it's time to buy.


IN JUST ONE PLAY
MADDEN 09
beats

DELIVERANCE
SOUL CALIBUR IV



SOULCALIBUR IV

AVAILABLE 7.29.08
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XBOX 360 LIVE

BANDAI NAMCO Games

PLAYSTATION 3

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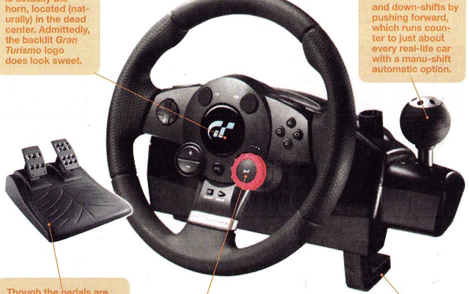
RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

May contain content inappropriate for children. Visit www.esrb.org for rating information.

Behind **the Wheel**

Racing fans looking to take their virtual driving experience to the next level might want to check out Logitech's Driving Force GT wheel peripheral, which has been specifically designed for use with current, and forthcoming *Gran Turismo* games on PS3. It offers contextual force feedback, a full 900-degrees wheel rotation, and sleek rubber grips all in a sturdy package, though it'll set you back about $150 and doesn't seem to function smoothly in any game but *GT5 Prologue* thus far. We should note that there is an in-depth option menu for fine-tuning the wheel for non-*GT* games, but you'll be doing the track testing to find your preferred set up. But hey, what do expect from a peripheral that claims to be "The Official Wheel of *Gran Turismo.*"



The largest button on the entire wheel is actually the horn, located (naturally) in the dead center. Admittedly, the backlit *Gran Turismo* logo does look sweet.

Ergonomic miscue? Curiously, up-shifts are executed by pulling back on the stick and down-shifts by pushing forward, which runs counter to just about every real-life car with a manu-shift automatic option.

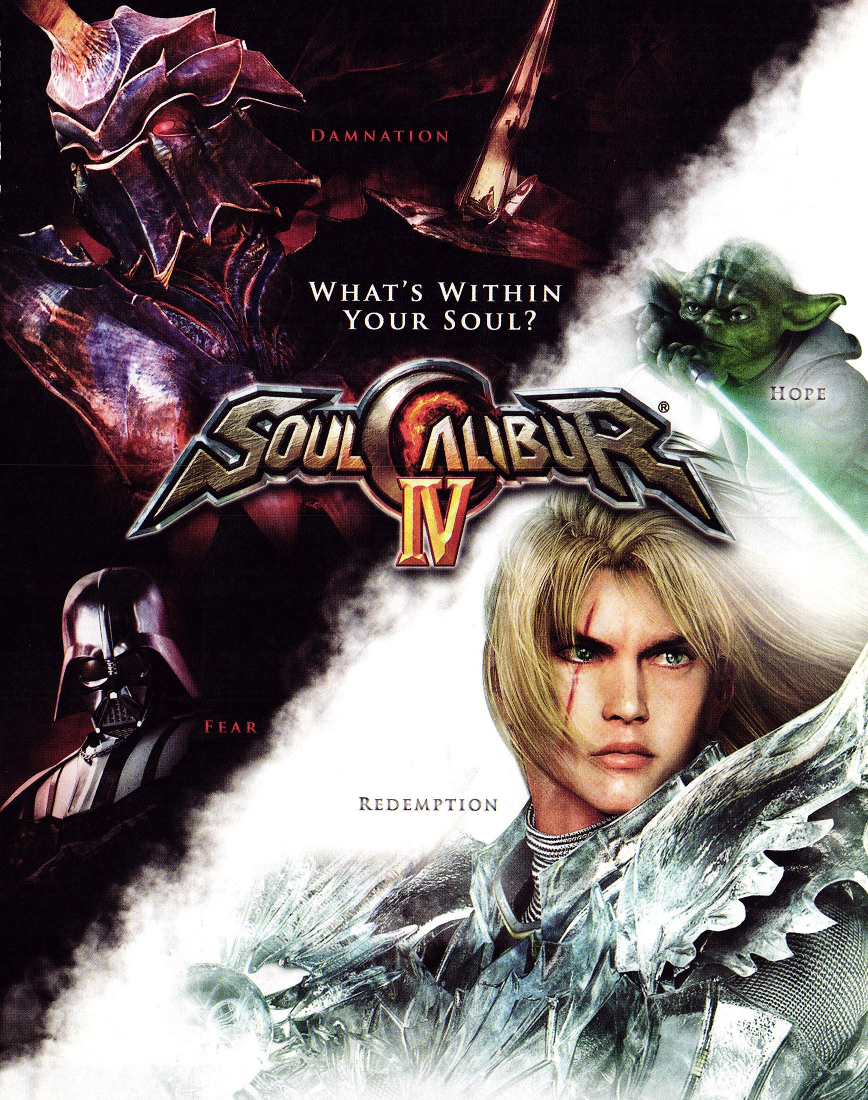
Though the pedals are a bit smaller in scale than the real deal, they still feel responsive and solid. The pedal board does an admirable job of staying put during the heat of competition as well.

The Real-time Adjustment Dial is a unique feature of this particular wheel that allows you to tweak the performance settings of your ride during gameplay.

The wheel includes sturdy clamps for firm attachment to a desk or table. Trust us, this is a welcome alternative to trying to hold it in your lap.

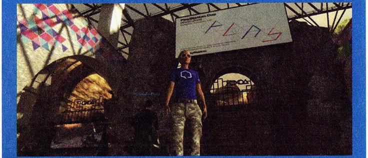
Welcome Back, Jade. We missed you!

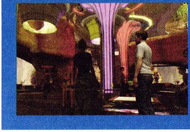
We're rubbing our eyes in disbelief. Can it be? *Beyond Good & Evil*—one of the most unique and intriguing games in the past few years—is getting a next-gen sequel? Praise the gaming powers-that-be (in this case, Ubisoft)! The game has just barely started production. In the meantime, drool over these screens.

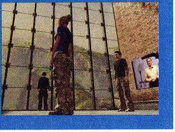

DAMNATION
WHAT'S WITHIN
YOUR SOUL?
HOPE
SOULCALIBUR® IV
FEAR
REDEMPTION

Chilling at HOME = Social Life?

Just because "social life" to you means settling into a comfortable couch for a night of *Call of Duty* multiplayer, it doesn't mean you can't go to parties. Sony recently announced a new "Media and Events Space" that will host everything from new game unveilings to sports events to fashion shows. Apparently, the space can be "re-dressed and re-branded just like a real-life venue" and will be available for both first and third parties to use. Break out the champagne glasses while you take a sneak peek below.

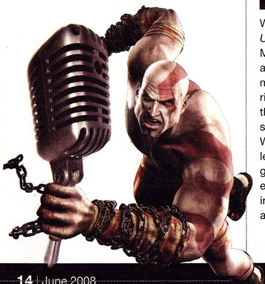




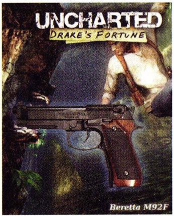


Guitar Hero Freebie

So maybe Xbox 360 owners got a few *Halo* songs for *Guitar Hero III* a few months ago. According to the PlayStation Underground, PS3 owners won't be left in the dust. Starting June, a free *God of War* song will be available for download on the PSN. Go get it!



Gun Play

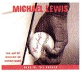


We're not sure this PS3 *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* Full Metal M92 Airsoft Gun will still be around come press time (Sony may be swooping in with copyright infringement claims), but the thought of owning Nathan's gun sends shivers down our spines. We don't support theft of intellectual property—with a game as great as *Uncharted,* the developers should be rewarded—if that's indeed what's happening, but it's a neat concept.

TOP10LIST

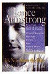
What we're playing, watching, reading, and absorbing in the real-world this month.

HDV 2002 Syrah | Wine | $60
We can class the joint up a bit, right? Rob's got a taste for the grown-up grape juice and a current favorite is the finely maturing '02 Syrah from a small vineyard in the Napa Valley. Scores 93 points on the Rob Scale. The rest of the staff prefers YUM 2008 Welch's.



Audiobooks | CD | $10-$25
Sitting in Bay Area traffic is no fun. The inane drivel of local radio gets old fast. So Rob has turned to the audiobook. Recent "reads" include Barry Greenstein's *Ace on the River,* Michael Lewis' fascinating *Moneyball,* and Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion.* We can see Rob's brain bulging already.

Speed Racer | Film | $10
While it's not in the pantheon of unforgettably great cinema, *Speed Racer* is better than its 35-percent RottenTomatoes.com rating suggests. It's a bold, original vision with an innovative narrative structure...or so Roger claims as he tearfully defends the honor of his favorite childhood cartoon series.



It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life | Book | $15
Every now and then, Roger needs a reminder that there are issues more important than his sucky commute, blown deadlines, and *having* to play games for a living. Lance Armstrong's account of his battle with cancer and his subsequent domination of the Tour de France put Roger's wussiness in true perspective. Livestrong!

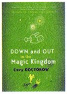
A Shot At Love 2 | TV | Your Soul
There really is no excuse for this one. None whatsoever. Oh, sure, Gary claims he's watching this series for it's sociological value: people at their worst, group dynamics, battles of the sexes, blah blah blah. But really—this is about as low as a TV show can go, and Gary's giddy recaps of last night's episode are reason enough to invest in noise-filtering headphones.

Cat Eyed Boy | Manga | $24.99/volume
From the author of sci-fi manga classic *The Drifting Classroom* comes this large-scale collection of spooky stories revolving around dark themes of vengeance and obsession. Gary usually hates all horror stuff (games, movies, comics), but horror manga? He can't get enough of it! Find out why he's so hooked by picking up this hauntingly spooky yet gleefully absurd collection.

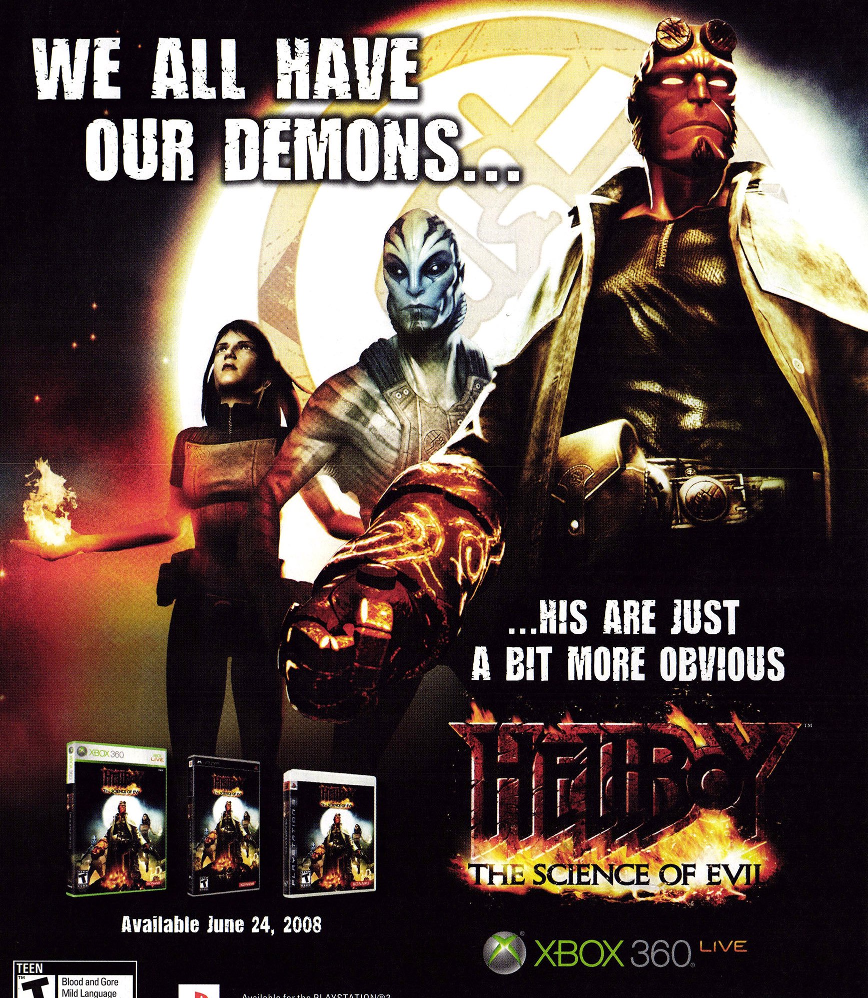
Curbside FC | Sport | Manly Pain
Taking advantage of his recreational soccer free agency, Ken has departed co-ed indoor team *Peligro* for a men's outdoor team called Curbside FC. This band of Craig's List mercenaries proved victorious in their very first match. Meanwhile, Rob "The Revolving Door" Smith soldiers on as *Peligro's* alleged goalie.

Life on Mars | AVI | Don't Ask, Don't Tell
Ken's digging this British TV series which revolves around police inspector Sam Tyler, who's transported back to 1973 after being hit by a car. An Americanized remake is slated to debut this fall, but ABC will have to deal with Angry Ken if they screw it up.

DailyLit.com | Internet | Free
DailyLit.com is one of Teresa's favorite ways to slack off at work. Browse their selection of free and cheaply priced books, pick one, sign up, and they'll email (or RSS) you a 10-minute chunk of the book each day. Teresa says it's the perfect way to look busy when you're actually procrastinating. Rob says, "Teresa! Meeting. *Now!*"



Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom | Book | $14
What if currency were measured by how much others respected you rather than by the number of dollar bills in your bank? What if Disneyland attractions were political arenas where factions had to prove their creative visions before being granted ownership of the ride? Science Fiction asks the best questions, which is one of the reasons Teresa loves Cory Doctorow's 2003 debut novel. Roger asks, "Why is it that we never see Mickey Mouse and Satan in the same place, at the same time? Hmm..."


WE ALL HAVE OUR DEMONS...
...HIS ARE JUST A BIT MORE OBVIOUS
HELLBOY™
THE SCIENCE OF EVIL
XBOX 360
KONAMI
Available June 24, 2008
XBOX 360 LIVE

TEEN
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Blood and Gore
Mild Language
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Available for the PLAYSTATION®3 computer entertainment system and the PSP® (PlayStation®Portable) system.

KROME STUDIOS

KONAMI
www.konami.com

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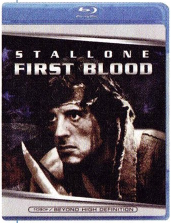
Blu-ray Central

A whole lot of B-movies, plus a *Bee Movie!*

It's a slow month for new releases, but since Paramount has finally reboarded the Blu-ray train, plenty of backlog titles are making the rounds. Also, John Rambo makes a comeback and Francis Ford Coppola waxes philosophic this month.

PlayStation: The Official Magazine
RAMBO CORNER



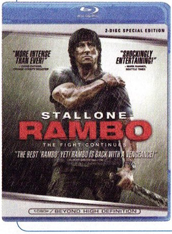
First Blood

PRICE: $19.99 **RATED:** R

| MOVIE | There are *Rambo* movies, and then there's *First Blood,* an utterly different experience. John Rambo's saga plays out much the same way as Stallone's other iconic character, Rocky. The original *Rocky* was a great film, while the rest of the series fell deeper into the land of shallow comic book-level drama. *First Blood* is no *Rocky,* but it has a rough and morally ambiguous tone to the characters. Rambo is no hero here, and arguably no better (or worse) than the hick town cops he brings into his own personal war. As a period piece about veterans in the late-70s, the movie holds up well, partially thanks to the clean and crisp hi-def transfer.

| EXTRAS | Several featurettes on the movie and deleted scenes form the core of the additions, but the gem is definitely Stallone's commentary track. Actually more interesting and entertaining than the movie's own soundtrack, Stallone provides ample and often hilarious insight on the filming of *First Blood* and the antics that went on around the set. This is one of the best commentary tracks we've heard lately.

MOVIES ★★★½ EXTRAS ★★★★


2-DISC SPECIAL EDITION
"MORE INTENSE THAN EVER!"
"SHOCKINGLY ENTERTAINING!"
STALLONE
RAMBO
THE FIGHT CONTINUES
"THE BEST 'RAMBO' YET! RAMBO IS BACK WITH A VENGEANCE!"
1080P / BEYOND HIGH DEFINITION

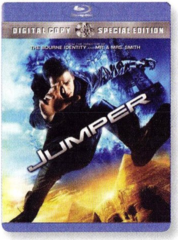
Rambo

PRICE: $39.95 **RATED:** R

| MOVIE | It's hard to argue that the swan song for John Rambo, Stallone's long-lasting, emotionally dysfunctional killer, is a good movie per se. The camera work is rough, Stallone's performance (at 65, no less) is bare bones, and the story is forgettable. Still, Stallone makes a sincere attempt to show the real-world genocidal horrors of Burma that get virtually no press, and the violence in the film is simply stunning. It's hard to find an American movie with more dismemberment and beheadings.

| EXTRAS | Plenty of making-of featurettes, *Rambo* retrospectives, and deleted scenes add to the value. Stallone's commentary—both audio-only and a more in-depth PIP—actually stops the movie to interweave the making-of footage. Unfortunately (probably due to the serious subject matter), Stallone's chatter is less engaging than in *First Blood.* An included handheld-specific version of the movie is a nice addition.

MOVIES ★★★ EXTRAS ★★★½


DIGITAL COPY
SPECIAL EDITION
FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE BOURNE IDENTITY AND MR. & MRS. SMITH
JUMPER

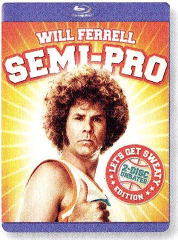
Jumper

PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** PG-13

| MOVIE | *Jumper* is a great looking, high concept comic-book-style action flick centered on a kid who can teleport. You'd think this premise of a fight against single-minded and brutal religious zealots would make for greatness with the director of *The Bourne Identity* at the helm. Instead, it flounders on the fact that apparently teleporting makes you stupid. With gaping plot holes and idiotic characters prevailing, *Jumper* only works as a visual treat—especially the jumping effects, which are very cool.

| EXTRAS | Several making-of features glorify what a great movie *Jumper* should have been. An animated graphic novel, deleted scenes, and somewhat interesting director and writer commentary round out decent extras.

MOVIES ★★
EXTRAS ★★★



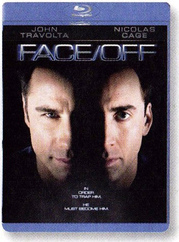
Semi-Pro

PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** R/UNRATED

| MOVIE | Sure to be a very minor footnote in Will Farrell's ever-growing career library, this one snuck by while everyone was asleep at the wheel. Two confused movies in one—the first a tired Will Farrell shtick-fest, the other an underdog sports movie—and neither is particularly successful or creative.

| EXTRAS | The disc includes both the R-rated and unrated versions, though the latter doesn't make much difference, and there's the usual array of promo featurettes, deleted, and alternate scenes. Unfortunately, none of them improve the value proposition.

MOVIES ★½
EXTRAS ★★★


JOHN TRAVOLTA
NICOLAS CAGE
FACE/OFF
IN ORDER TO TRAP HIM, HE MUST BECOME HIM.

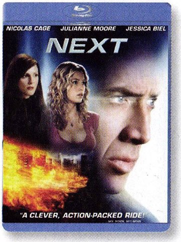
Face/Off

PRICE: $29.99 **RATED:** R

|MOVIE| John Woo must be brilliant, because somehow a movie about two guys switching faces and jumping around shooting at each other (and usually missing) turned out to be brilliantly entertaining, and still manages to have more fun, violence, and thrills than most contemporary action flicks. Also, as Paramount's first Blu-ray release, the disc looks and sounds great.

|EXTRAS| This anniversary edition celebrates the release with an array of making-of shorts, deleted scenes, an alternate ending, and even commentary between John Woo and the writers. Unfortunately, the commentary is dry and slow. Still, diehard fans of this highly regarded action flick who can handle the plodding pacing will enjoy the interesting tidbits among the commentary.

MOVIES	★★★★
EXTRAS	★★★


NICOLAS CAGE
JULIANNE MOORE
JESSICA BIEL
NEXT
"A CLEVER, ACTION-PACKED RIDE!"

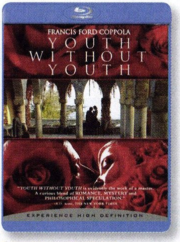
Next

PRICE: $29.99 **RATED:** PG-13

|MOVIE| *Next* didn't get much attention for the over-exposed Cage, yet it's certainly one of the actor's most interesting movies. Based on a Philip K. Dick story, the real star of the show is the cinematography. Cage plays a man who can see two minutes into his own future, and the movie has a thoroughly entertaining way of showing off this ability. The story about terrorists attacking the city and desperate law enforcement is fairly standard, but *Next* is still a surprisingly appealing sci-fi thriller.

|EXTRAS| At least the weak making-of videos are presented in HD. That's about all we can say about them.

MOVIES	★★★½
EXTRAS	★½


FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA
YOUTH WITHOUT YOUTH
EXPERIENCE HIGH DEFINITION

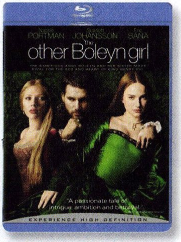
Youth Without Youth

PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** R

|MOVIE| Francis Ford Coppola's philosophical indulgence on life, the universe, and aging is almost a lot of great things—a great fantasy, a WWII thriller, even a sci-fi parable. Mainly, *Youth Without Youth* is an art film with a bigger budget. The first two acts are compellingly smart and tense, yet the third act is nearly inexplicably out of the blue. In the end, the movie is a beautiful, yet unsatisfying obsession.

|EXTRAS| Coppola's commentary occasionally sheds some light on the overall nature of the plot, though he spends far too much time simply retelling the action on the screen. Beyond that, extras are light, with just a few short making-of bits.

MOVIES	★★★
EXTRAS	★★


PORTMAN JOHANSSON BANA
the other Boleyn girl
"A passionate tale of intrigue, ambition and betrayal"
EXPERIENCE HIGH DEFINITION

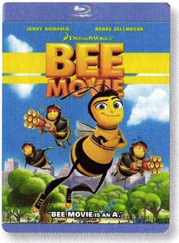
The Other Boleyn Girl

PRICE: $38.96 **RATED:** PG-13

|MOVIE| Henry VIII is, for whatever reason, in vogue at the moment, especially with the ladies, and if you and your dearest didn't get enough of the chauvinistic player of a king with *The Tudors* on Showtime, here's some more. Slow to the point of plodding at times, *The Other Boleyn Girl* shines whenever Natalie Portman's devious and ambitious Anne Boleyn is on screen—at least for the first couple acts. Then the movie gets creepy and uncomfortable, and, more unfortunately, remains reasonably true to history.

|EXTRAS| Special features are sadly lacking. Even the lightweight historical bits are simply promo fodder with only marginal amounts of interesting content. This is a shame, as some meaty factual documentaries on the topic would have been welcome.

MOVIES	★★★½
EXTRAS	★★


JERRY SEINFELD
RENÉE ZELLWEGER
DREAMWORKS
BEE MOVIE
"BEE MOVIE IS AN A."

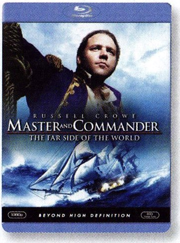
Bee Movie

PRICE: $39.99 **RATED:** PG

|MOVIE| As narcissistic actor projects go, *Bee Movie* starts out with promise. However it quickly devolves from quaintly amusing to confused mess as soon as Seinfeld's Barry Bee decides to sue humanity for their honey-making processes. Nonsensical even by animated movie standards, it's hard to believe even little kids will dig sitting through it.

|EXTRAS| Aimed—unsurprisingly—at the younger set, the extras include a Barry Bee trivia track, build-a-bee game, and educational "world of bees" short, among other promo-type videos. The commentary with Seinfeld and some of the other filmmakers is so disappointingly aimless and low key that it's hardly worth including.

MOVIES	★½
EXTRAS	★★★


RUSSELL CROWE
MASTER AND COMMANDER
THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD
BEYOND HIGH DEFINITION

Master and Commander

PRICE: $39.98 **RATED:** PG-13

|MOVIE| It seems likely that *Master and Commander* will go down in cinematic history as one of the great war movies of our era. Unflinching and unromantic in its view of naval life from a bygone era, it's amazingly entertaining as both an adventure movie and a historical epic. The presentation itself is equally excellent with great colors—though there is noticeable noise in the dark and foggy scenes—and house-shaking sound.

|EXTRAS| Regrettably light. Forgoing the inclusion of the documentary and myriad other special features from the DVD collector's edition, the Blu-ray version has only a paltry amount of feature materials.

MOVIES	★★★★½
EXTRAS	★★

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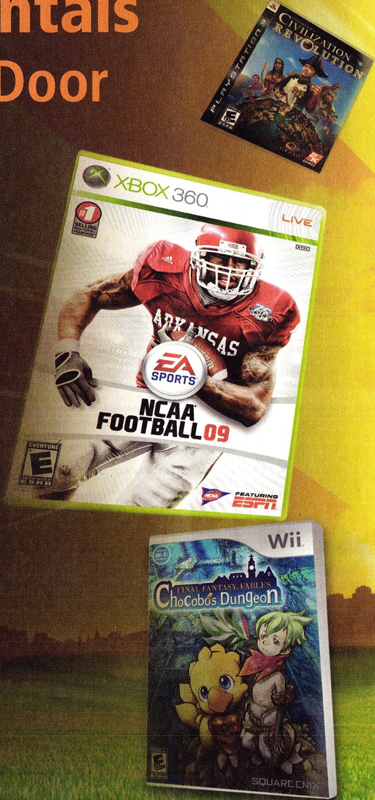
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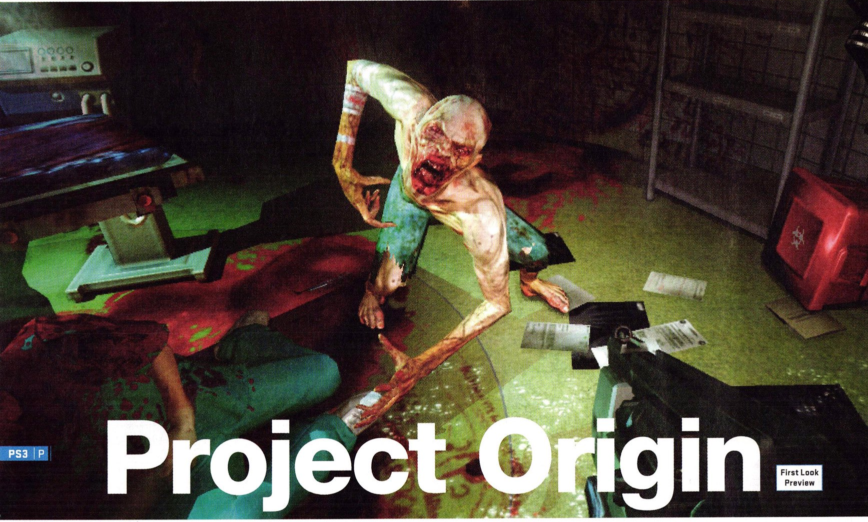


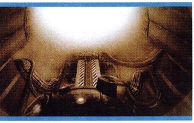
PS3 | P

Project Origin

First Look Preview

The little-death that brings total obliteration

PS3 **AVAILABLE:** Fall 2008 **GENRE:** Action **PUBLISHER:** Warner Bros. Interactive **DEVELOPER:** Monolith Productions



American military macho and Japanese-style creeps-at-the-edge-of-your-vision horror: Two great tastes that taste great together. Monolith Productions' forthcoming *Project Origin* doesn't even reference the seminal shooter *F.E.A.R.* in its title—of which it is technically a sequel—due to pesky, petty, IP-ownership niggles. But still, that same spooky little girl Alma wants you to come out and play.

SITUATION ALPHA: After a less-than-successful Delta Force raid on the Armacham weapons-dev corporation, you wake up from an operating table…to a dimly-lit, locked-down mil/sci facility crawling with squads of other amped Deltas geared up to kill you on sight if you don't kill them first.

SITUATION CRITICAL: After a few close-quarters, extremely bloody firefights, you can hear the desperate radio-chatter of those same Deltas, now frightened out of their minds—screaming at each other to kill the unknown hostile who's systematically offing their numbers in the dark, leaving squad-members and facility personnel alike smeared onto the walls, or dribbling from overhead air-vents in little, wet, red chunks.

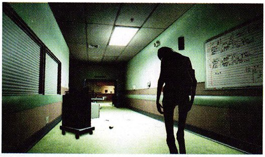
SITUATION FUBAR: They're not talking about you.

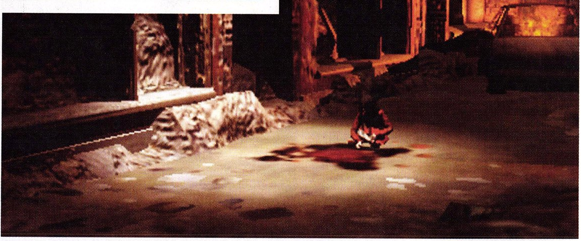
"The Ring" Around The Rosey

Oh yeah, one or two other things: The whole facility in which you start the game—the entire surrounding city, in fact—is about to come down around your ears…and following you in the darkened hallways (and soon-to-be city ruins) is a ghostly, creepy little girl with her hair hanging in her ghostly, creepy little eyes. Her name is Alma. And she is pissed off.

When she appears, strange things occur. Electronics malfunction;

What is that thing (below left)? No idea, so we'll just shoot first and ask questions of its corpse later.





Yeah, that's little Alma; sat in what appears to be a pool of blood. Though the name might have changed, the *F.E.A.R.* factor will still be high. We've even seen scenes where a distinctly different, yet still strikingly spooky Alma makes an appearance. Odd one that girl, definitely an odd one.

otherwise all-business soldiers have disturbing hallucinations; footprints, messages scrawled in blood, and nightmarish figures appear out of nowhere; and people die in messy, unspeakable ways. Once upon a time, as fairy tales begin, something happened to Alma in this facility. Something that was not a fairytale beginning or end. And now something even worse is going to happen to somebody else.

John Mulkey, Lead Designer: "The evolution of Alma is something that we've considered very carefully. There are different aspects to Alma that we've been able to build on, as well as allowing more interaction and "purpose" between the player and Alma herself. From the moment [the massive explosion] wreaks destruction throughout the city, Alma becomes a much more serious threat that has a very strong impact on the evolution of the main character in *Project Origin.*"

The Monolith designers are essentially disregarding the events of *Extraction Point* and *Perseus Mandate* (the two non-Monolith expansions for the original *F.E.A.R.*) and introducing a stand-alone game that begins about half an hour before the conclusion of the original game.

Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down

Pretty much from the outset, we already know the bad news, or some of it (the first game's Armacham raid was a frakking disaster). The resultant explosion at the facility—the designers only half-jokingly refer to it as the "Alma Bomb"—has reduced most of the surrounding city to ruins…and seems to have unleashed the vengeful spirit of Alma on the world at large in a major way.

Despite *Project Origin's* new emphasis on outdoor combat (in the cracked-open sprawl of a ruined city), the designers maintain their staunch commitment to the first game's signature atmosphere-infused action. Fans of that unique balance will find themselves returning to the Monolith school of tense military combat and creepy, ghostly-little-girl horror (going back to their Alma mater, as it were).

"The gore and carnage that comes from multiple intense battles with various enemies can become numbing to a player after a while. This makes the fear of the unexpected and the unknown a key component of *Project Origin.* The unexpected is seeing things out of the corner of your eye, scenes as well as sounds that don't quite seem right and seem unsettling. They also need to build to crescendos as opposed to just being random moments throughout the game. We're being very careful to incorporate reason and purpose behind the various types of horrific and scare moments. There is also the global suspense and mystery of the horrific events and 'Alma Moments' that take you somewhere unexpected—that we're not ready to speak about at this time," explains Mulkey.

Thankfully, pictures speak louder than words—trebly so if they happen to be moving pictures, like the ones we've seen both preceding and following the wholesale destruction of the game's urban environs. ➔

Project Origin Q and A:

We can neither comfirm nor deny, at this time

Q Including the outdoor combat, can you talk about each of the game's prime new features?

Variety has been a key driving goal for the team this time around—variety in environments, weapons, enemy encounters and variety in how to approach the numerous combat events.

Evolution of Alma: Interaction with Alma is much more prevalent and involved.

Evolution of AI: The enemies are smarter, more organized, and more lethal.

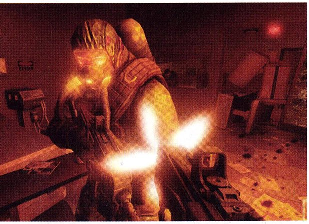
Evolution of Interaction: You can flip over cover, jump through and over items, and generally interact with the world more.

Q Approximately how many hours will the campaign mode last?

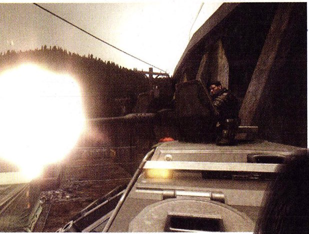
We're looking at 12 to 15 hours at this time.

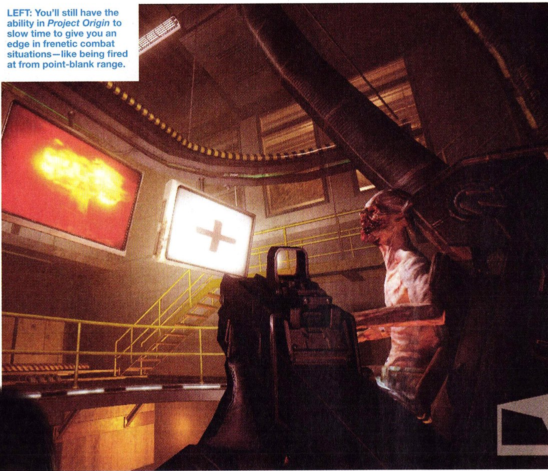
Q Can you detail anything about the multiplayer modes?

I could—but then I'd have to kill you.

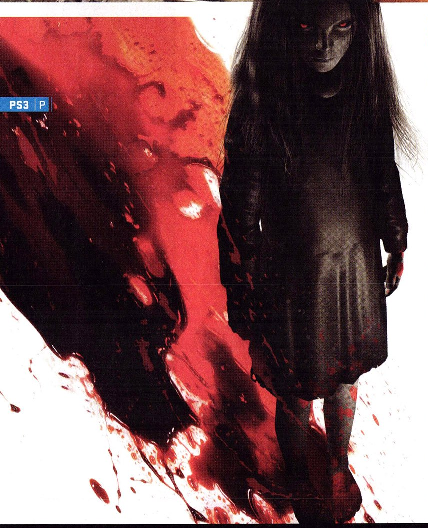


LEFT: You'll still have the ability in *Project Origin* to slow time to give you an edge in frenetic combat situations—like being fired at from point-blank range.





Proof that our government is NOT hiding aliens or supernatural technology? Game fiction teaches us, whenever that happens, something goes wrong and what should have been kept inside gets outside.



PS3 | P

One thing for sure is that our new protagonist, seemingly an "ordinary" Delta Force operative, ends up with cranked-up reflexes (comparable to those of the Point Man in the first game) as a result of his experience on the operating table. Good thing, too, because at least one bloody, clambering apparition that seems connected to Alma moves so fast—floor to wall to ceiling and back again—that even the Slo-Mo effect seems inadequate to track it.

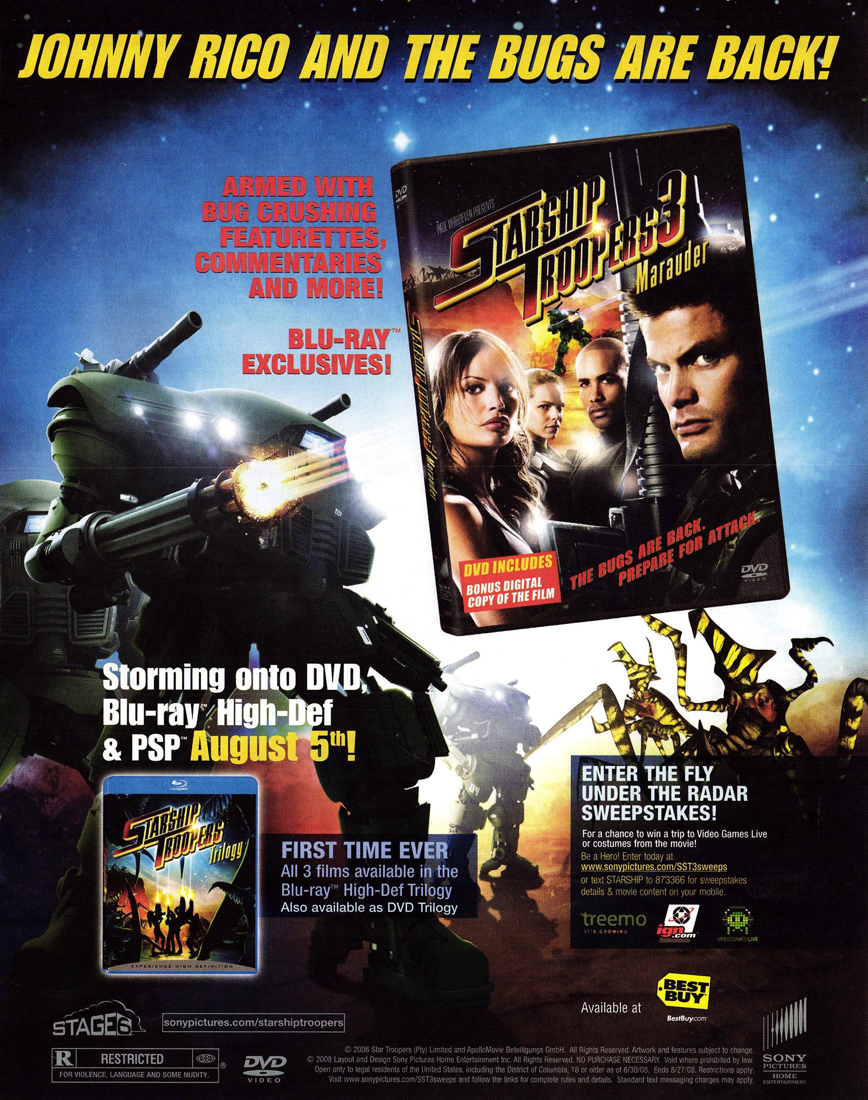
We've seen a large, alarming bipedal mech of some sort—almost certainly one of Armacham's classified weapons projects—big enough to step over (or slap aside) a trashed automobile out in the debris-strewn streets. At least one other potential foe out there seemingly had enough firepower to bring entire sections of a crumbling freeway overpass down. We've also seen a satisfyingly-powerful, man-portable energy rifle that makes a crackling, intimidating sound like an overloading power-line and looks like it burns through walls as easily as it does through the heavily-armored soldiers behind them. No word if it has any particular effect on dead little girls.

That's still the biggest mystery of all, of course—Alma herself. She appears to be much more present this time around—not merely through intrusive psychokinetic events and alarming hallucinations, but through several messages and questions scrawled in blood ("WHO IS HE?" "CAN HE SEE?") Not to mention at least one blatant, physical manifestation that seemed to pose as much a direct threat to the nearby monstrosities as it did to any humans or inanimate objects in the same proximity—namely, the threat of being relentlessly dragged down a seemingly-normal hallway, pulled toward some kind of hard-vacuum rip in reality, like an airlock open to the cold and dark of utmost space.

Project Origin is slated to materialize this fall, when Monolith will remind us: Not all little girls are made of "sugar, spice and everything nice." From what we've seen so far, may Heaven help those who forget it.

Alma sure as Hell won't.

Chris Hudak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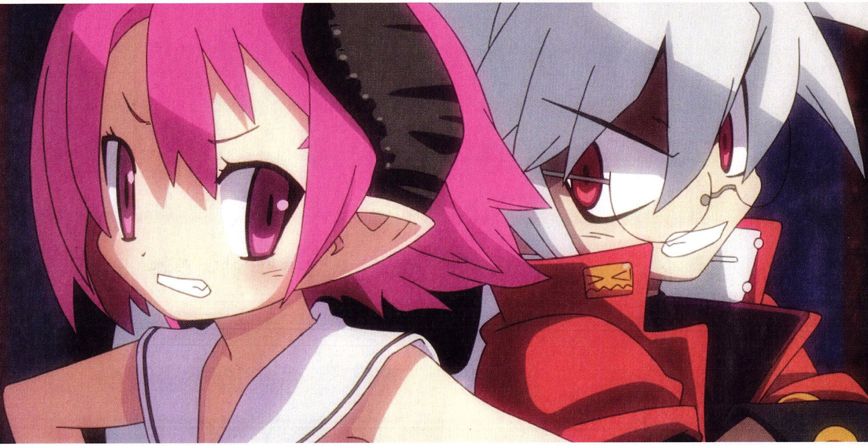


If these competitive-student types were any more cliquey, quirky or dysfunctional, there'd have to be a musical number in here somewhere. Oh, wait...

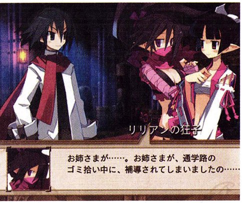
Disgaea 3

First Look Preview

Midnight on the campus of good and evil, dood

PS3 | P

PS3 AVAILABLE: August GENRE: Strategy RPG PUBLISHER: NIS America DEVELOPER: Nippon Ichi Software



リリアンの狂子

お姉さまが……。お姉さまが、通学路の
ゴミ拾い中に、補導されてしまいましたの……

The North American version features optional Japanese audio—you too can learn to talk like a *nihongo*-speaking netherworld delinquent!

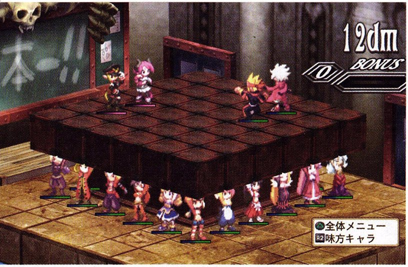
If Frowningly-Serious, Generic High-Fantasy RPGs™ can be seen as a sort of viral-tumor blight on videogaming, you can think of Nippon Ichi Software's *Disgaea* series as an intercontinental delivery system with a MIRVed payload of Interferon... with "HAVE A NICE DAY" spray-painted on each warhead. *Disgaea 3* is one of those warheads.

If you're new to the series, *Disgaea* games are turn-based strategy RPGs—heavily anime-flavored, self-aware, humorous, and peppered with all kinds of little oddball quirks (its most recent PSP outing, *Afternoon of Darkness,* features an alternate mode that assumes the protagonist is accidentally killed during the opening sequence, thus turning over the entire narrative to a hitherto supporting character).

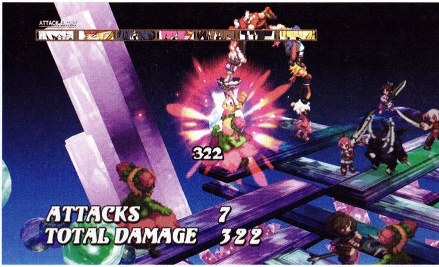
Disgaea 3 continues in the wacky boot steps of its predecessors—but don't let the big-eyed anime stylings and jokes mislead you: This hardcore, battlefield-altering strategy game is out to kick your butt.

This time around, our attentions focus on Evil Academy—an Underworld institute of, um, lower learning for down-and-coming demon students of all persuasions and curricula. All things scholastic work a little differently, here. "Honor Students"—like our young demon-protagonist, Mao—are the ones who never go to their classes, and avoid extracurricular entanglements like the plague; "delinquent" screw-ups, on the other hand—like our cute little demon-winged Miss Raspberyl, "Beryl" to you—ruin their academic reputations by doing reprehensible things like actually showing up for class, performing good deeds, and trying to persuade misguided psychos like Mao to not try and off their demon-Overlord fathers (in power-mad notions they got from reading too many *manga,* as is the case with this particular game). Hell-arity ensues.

The *Disgaea* universe has always had its own distinctive, unapologetically goofy style—anime-minded and oddball, even by Japanese standards. Populated by its resident student body of cartoonish, humanoid demons and various kooky creatures, the labyrinthine sprawl of the Evil Academy has the look and feel of a Gutenberg-era European castle-town, inexplicably overrun with cosplayers—not so much



Support your local student body—no, REALLY.



Yet another classic, magnificently-ridiculous team/combo attack, *Disgaea*-style.

East-meets-West as Hogwarts-meets-Harajuku.

One can hardly omit mentioning the loveable, penguin-like flunkies called Prinnies, who pepper their speech with the word "dood"—in English, at least—and explode on impact when used as last-ditch projectile weapons. It's enough to send an oh-so-serious emo *Final Fantasy* type reeling from the room, bleeding from the eyes and ears. So *gambatte* there, Nippon Ichi.

Disgaea 3 will maintain a ratio of turn-based battle gameplay to Academy preparation/storytelling elements comparable to previous *Disgaea* titles—about 80/20 (shifting to about 95/5 once you've beaten the main game, and moved on to try the various extra stages).

Deep, turn-based battles are the mechanical heart of the *Disgaea* series, and there are a number of improvements in the works. First off, the battlefields are larger; not only is there more physical space, but the battlegrounds are true three-dimensional multi-level affairs with treasures, boxes, and destructible terrain in the form of Geo Blocks. Geo Blocks are the three-dimensional extension of the previous games' Geo Panels: In *Disgaea 2,* you needed to be aware of Geo Panels and Geo Symbols—differently-colored battlefield squares and nodes that could profoundly affect the outcome of a battle when used in various explosive combinations.

Now, imagine the same sort of sympathetic-detonation scheme, but stacked in three-dimensional cubes. Blow out the purple block at the base of a stack, causing the red block above it to fall next to another red block, immediately annihilating both. The yellow block that was on top of that falls, takes damage, and explodes. Needless to say, the one poor enemy schmuck who was unlucky enough to be standing on top of all this now-collapsing, constantly-exploding crap to begin with—well, he is *screwed.* And this might be your first move of the battle!

And, hey, if the original battlefield configuration isn't quite set up for such a chain-reaction at the outset, you can always pick up some Geo Blocks and throw them somewhere else just to get the domino-effect thing rolling. If you can't be part of the solution, why not exacerbate the problem?

Speaking of throwing, previous games allowed you to pick up party-members and toss them to gain a little ground in battle. Now, you can chain said throws from member to member, hefting allies up to higher battlefield-platforms, or even volleyballing them from one character to another. Even the more brain-dead monsters in your party can continue to hurl your new breed of forward-juggled fighters (as long as said monsters are facing in the proper direction to facilitate the hand-off). It adds a lot of reach to the less-mobile members of your strike force, and can really catch your enemies with their pants down, if done right.

Evil Academy itself functions like the Overlord's castle in *Disgaea*—i.e., as a hub/HQ where you can power up items, heal party members, create new units, check game status, and try to bribe/muscle/booze the Student Council into granting various requests between battles (everything from "summon characters from previous games" to "make a new story chapter for me.") In addition to *Disgaea 2's* blistering Item World, there will also be a Class World (which does the same random-field, stat-boosting thing for characters).

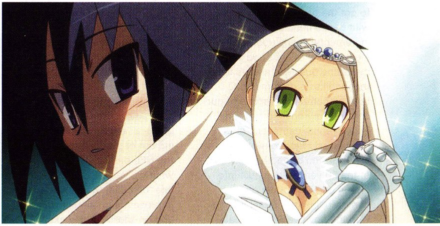
As if all that weren't enough, *Disgaea 3* will also offer puzzle-style Dark Stages, optional Japanese dialogue/audio, and downloadable characters, items, and even complete story chapters via PlayStation Network, shortly after release. If you've never experienced the weirdness that is *Disgaea,* now would be a perfect time to get on board—watch your step, and mind the exploding Prinnies, dood.

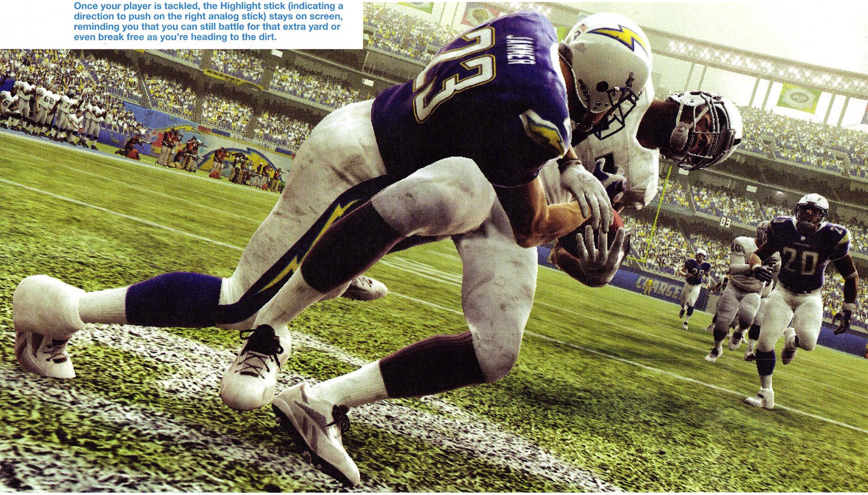
Chris Hudak

69dm
BONUS
0
全体メニュー
R2 味方キャラ

Senior-class demon chicks with tennis rackets and spiked bats, ready to teach school—kinda gives the phrase "hazing from Hell" a whole new meaning.

Sapphire, a princess from the human world—proof positive that not every Nippon Ichi character is a complete psychopath (or an exploding pseudo-penguin).





Once your player is tackled, the Highlight stick (indicating a direction to push on the right analog stick) stays on screen, reminding you that you can still battle for that extra yard or even break free as you're heading to the dirt.

PS3 | P

Madden NFL 09

Happy 20th Anniversary, and welcome back Madden

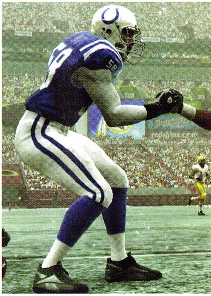
Hands-On Preview

PS3 AVAILABLE: August GENRE: Sports PUBLISHER: EA Sports DEVELOPER: EA Sports

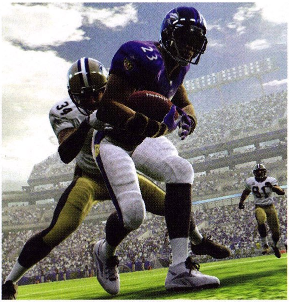
It has to be said: hands-on with *Madden* (the game, not the icky thought that phrase invokes if you think of the big guy himself) is not normally sufficient to get the games press abuzz with excitement. Despite each incremental yearly upgrade selling gajillions of units, we in the magazine business always figure those folks as determined to buy the game irrespective of our commentary on its oft-minimal feature enhancements. Though I've played *Madden* every year on one platform or another for most of the 20 years it has built into one of gaming's most dominant franchises, interest waned with the tiny tweaks that really stretched belief (be a blocker this year, ahead of the runner…woop-di-freakin'-do).

So you may have gathered by now that *Madden NFL 09* is worth the space, the time, and your consideration if you've passed over the game in recent years. Despite the 20th anniversary "celebration" the choice of retired Packers' QB, Brett Favre as cover athlete seemed primed to hand deliver jokes about an aging, over-the-hill franchise being out of touch, and not even at the NFL party this year. But from what we've seen and played of a late '09 build, the improvements in presentation are significant, and on-the-field play exhibits one of the most comprehensive upgrades ever.

A stated effort to make the jargon-heavy, high-end detail of play-calling more accessible to a casual audience appears to have been implemented with a slick style that doesn't take away any of the depth for long-time *Madden* or just plain NFL fans. Play names that require insider knowledge—like "Pro Left 33 Blast"—will be labeled as "run left" or something similar on the beginner skill levels. Similarly, on the field itself a constant display (that can be turned off) of key button presses for receivers or defenders, and for hitting the right-analog stick for special



We couldn't find the option to film the opposition's play signals, but maybe that's only available to the Patriots.



The developers are promising better online connection stability this year, along with the ability to run full 32-player online leagues. *Madden* will even tap into fantasy football, letting you use the game to manage your fantasy league, and even use your fantasy roster as a team in online games.

For $90 a special 20th Anniversary Edition of *Madden NFL 09* will include a bonus disc of NFL Films archive footage, a playbook of classic "money" plays from past *Maddens,* an emulated version of *Madden '93,* and even a cyberathlete model of a *Madden* player from the PSone game that you can import to your pristine PS3 if you so wish.

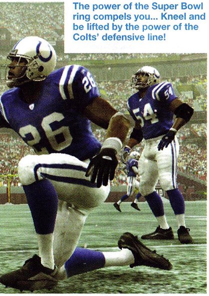
"highlight" plays ensures that all the information you need for an effective game is right there in front of you.

Better yet—and personally I'm thrilled about this option since despite my long-time fandom of the franchise I consistently get destroyed playing friends—is the ability to set different difficulty levels for each player in a one-on-one match. At the heart of the difficulty setting is the new Madden IQ score. At the start of the game you can choose to take the Madden Test. The big fella himself introduces the nuances with clear instruction that help prove that EA still gets him in the studio for recording and filming sessions. On a *Tron*-like football field you run fairly swift drills of increasing difficulty in four areas: Rush Offense, Pass Offense, Rush Defense, Pass Defense. By figuring out the cyber-dude you control, then timing the right button presses (all clearly marked) you'll score points that ultimately are translated into your overall IQ. A score of 800 is the max, and beginners, according to the developers, are likely to score around 200. Having not played *Madden* since the beginning of '08 I was happy with my 369 (though Pass Offense contributed zero points as I failed every test). These stats were then used as I jumped into a quick match, hosting the hated rivals the Broncos in my Raiders' home McAfee Coliseum. It gave me breaks on pass plays, and at the end of the game adjusted the sliders for each of those four settings, and offered an immediate chance to go to the training ground to practice Rush Offense as the game AI had been unimpressed with my All-Pro level performance.

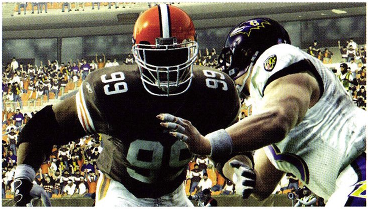
On the field there were several new standouts. One was the straight up crispness of the graphics, backed by animations with seemingly hundreds more frames of movement than last year, all fluidly connected into amazingly realistic runs, dives, blocks, catches, and tackles. Another was the influx of in-game advertising. Sprint sponsors the replays (of which you can see many, including a really cool telestrater format voiced by NFL analyst Chris Collingsworth dissecting what you did on a play, but showing who else was open that you might have considered hitting with your pass.) Snickers were prominent on the info bar.

Play-calling also seemed simpler, with that same *Tron*-style graphic from the test center being used to illustrate in full 3D action the play that you have highlighted in your playbook. Visualizing the play first will certainly help newcomers get accustomed to their options, and see how it should look, regardless of their on-field outcome. Of course, in keeping with this spirit, to balance the difficulty you can set a number of Rewinds for each player, essentially providing a mulligan for a botched play.

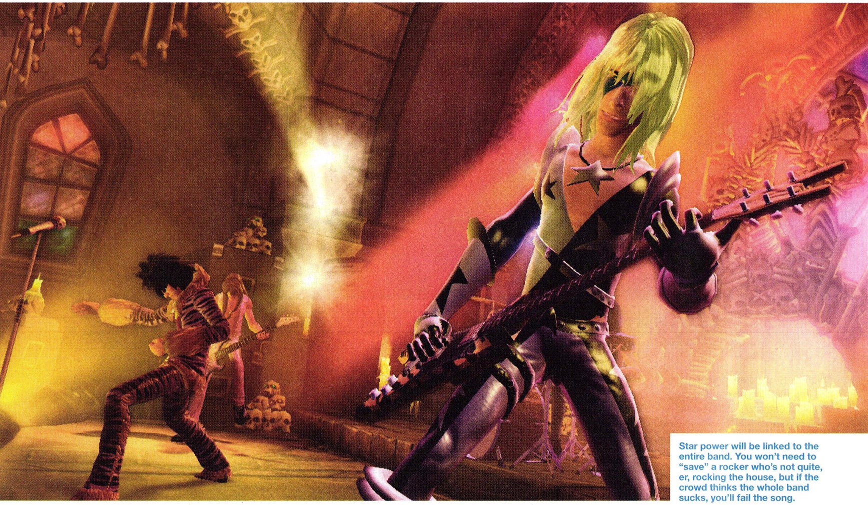
Heading to stores August 12th, this is the first *Madden* in a very long time to really get us excited again about the potential of the franchise. The online functionality is pretty incredible, the visual detail is impressive, and the focus on accessiblity to players of all abilities appears to have crested the challenge of allowing depth and openness to experienced players while not overloading newcomers with heavy jargon and brain fritzing options. Favre chose the wrong year to retire… or did he (retire)? Rob Smith



The power of the Super Bowl ring compels you... Kneel and be lifted by the power of the Colts' defensive line!



For the beginner, the playbook will include just four offense, four defense, and 12 special teams plays to choose from. Over the course of a game, reflecting the coaches' tweaking of set plays, your plays will evolve a little.

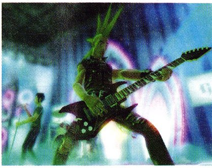


Star power will be linked to the entire band. You won't need to "save" a rocker who's not quite, er, rocking the house, but if the crowd thinks the whole band sucks, you'll fail the song.

PS3 | P

Guitar Hero World Tour

First Look Preview



Though nothing has been confirmed, Neversoft promises a "more aggressive schedule" for official downloadable content.

It's not just about the guitar anymore

PS3 AVAILABLE: Fall GENRE: Music PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Neversoft Entertainment

With *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* both wrestling to reign supreme in the music game genre, jazzing up the graphics and tweaking the note tracks is no longer enough.

Guitar Hero, for years the undisputed king of simulated rock rhythm, was dethroned when *Rock Band* debuted with drums, microphones, and a jukebox's worth of downloadable content in addition to the requisite guitars. As music game junkies formed virtual bands, held "rehearsals," and oozed enough nerdiness to make LARPers grin, *Guitar Hero's* guitar and bass duo started to look a little lonely.

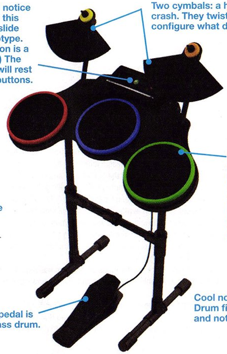
But competition truly is the whetstone of talent. In an effort to nudge its way back to the top, *Guitar Hero World Tour* (which really should be named *Guitar Hero IV* or *No-Longer-Just-Guitar Hero)* unveils its throne-usurping strategy, which includes a full band, a music creator with music-sharing support, customizable characters, and a bouncy, velocity-sensitive drum set.

Rock on, rock star

The bread and butter of any music game is its track list. *World Tour* will offer over ninety new songs—all master tracks—to the series' roster, including work from Van Halen, Sublime, The Eagles, and Linkin Park. We spied other songs (which we aren't allowed to know about yet) in our eyes-only demo that have our fingers itching to pick up a virtual guitar or bang on a plastic drum set. Here's a teaser: If the "Legends of Rock" title from *GHIII* were applied to *World Tour,* there'd be some carefully chosen exceptions to the "rock" part.

The venues in *World Tour* are animated in *Guitar Hero's* trademark exaggerated art style, though amped up, of course. Take the new State Fair venue: flickering lights, a whirling Ferris

THE EVOLUTION OF SIMULATED DRUMMING



Sharp-eyed readers will notice the mark of the devil on this drum set, which we let slide since this is just a prototype. (Just kidding; competition is a good thing, remember?) The drum's "motherboard" will rest beneath the controller buttons.

Two cymbals: a high hat and a crash. They twist, so you can configure what direction they face.

One snare, two toms. Pressure sensitive drum pads mean you'll be able to nail 16th and even 32nd notes. The drum differentiates a tap from a bang, useful for creating different sounds in the music creator.

Notice the lack of a wire connecting the drums to a console? All of the instruments in *World Tour* will be wireless.

The foot pedal is for the bass drum.

Cool note about drumming: Drum fillers will be triggered and not pre-determined.

wheel in one corner, a spinning carousel in another, a roaring crowd, and your own customized rocker on a neon-lighted stage. As your band performs, the camera weaves through the scene, spotlighting individual rockers during solos, cutting to the audience, or highlighting the singer as he executes song-specific dance moves. Last year's Backyard Bash venue pales in comparison with the energy *World Tour* emits. Other environs we glimpsed were a dark, emo-tastic Goth Club and of all things, an Aircraft carrier.

Banding together

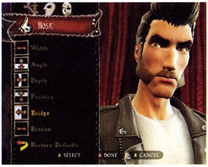
To complete the fantasy of a virtual rocker, *World Tour's* single-player career mode pits you as a guitar-for-hire. Instead of the linear beat-n-songs-to-earn-next-stage model, *World Tour* will offer an iota more versatility. You pick up gigs by checking out fliers—accept the job, perform, get paid, and more gigs will be posted. The best part? You'll be able to change the difficulty setting at any time without having to restart your career. Though boss battles stubbornly remain (much to Rob's chagrin), you won't need to fiddle with power-ups to win (though they still make up an integral part of the online Battle Mode.)

For co-op band careers, one person starts a band. In his four-player ensemble (guitar, bass, drum, microphone), any variety of online or same-console mix can be used—so come curfew, band members can migrate from your basement to their own homes without disrupting the campaign. If they're not around, you can pick up random scab musicians online.

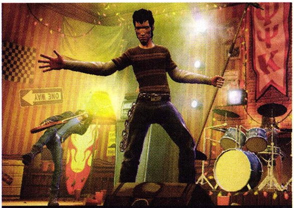
Taking the stage

Whether *Guitar Hero World Tour's* host of new features will be sufficient to cajole gamers into splurging on another set of plastic drums is still uncertain. But the amount of energy and thought that Neversoft's put into *World Tour* shows that they're taking the competition seriously. This isn't just some half-arsed yearly remake. It's the opposite, and it proves one fact: *Guitar Hero* wants its throne back.

Teresa Dun

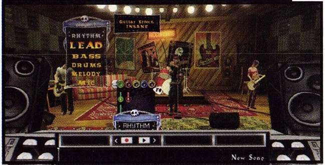


Detailed options let you customize a rocker in *GH's* caricature style. Choices range from age, make-up, nose, jaws, to "Presence" (your character's intro and exit animations). You'll also be able to design your rocker's instruments down to pick guards and knob configurations.

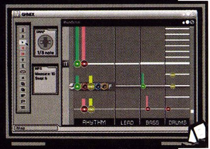


"But it *is* a real instrument!"

Real musicians create music. They jam. They record. They sweat over refrains, bridges, and melodies, all to lay a masterpiece at the altar of music. *Rock Band* took us one step into the world of musicians by featuring a band's worth of instruments; *Guitar Hero World Tour* takes us another by spiriting us into the recording room.



▲Music creation comes in two flavors in *World Tour*. The first is the music studio, where up to four instruments can simultaneously jam and record. Before you start, you can pick what scale your instrument will use (you can re-create any note with the guitar controller's normal five buttons), what kits you want to use (which add effects to the instrument), and more. Shortcuts and pre-set modes make it so the musically challenged can jump in and still sound decent. Solo or as a band, you can create your own music or "overwrite" one of *World Tour's* 90 songs by creating your own note tracks.



▶For the musical elite, *World Tour* offers the GHmix mode, a toned-down version of a computer music-sequencing program. Though you'll be able to create songs freestyle, this, too, will have an "easy" mode that lets you choose beats per measure and snap values. You'll be able to loop, step record, set markers, and lot of the other complicated technicalities that go into music creation.

What this means for non-creative types is that there will be a consistent batch of free music to download and play. Once someone has composed a piece, it'll be available on an Activision-hosted server. A YouTube-esque rating system will help you find the best releases. Worried that the composers might've created a piece beyond your skill? Their note tracks will always be "Expert," but a note interpreter will translate the arrangement to fit other difficulty levels.

PlayStation Gallery

Updates, sneak peeks, works-in-progress

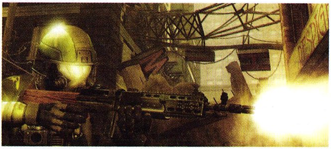
Resistance 2

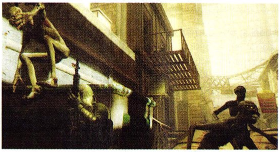
PS3 AVAILABLE: November GENRE: Action/Shooter PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: Insomniac Games

Just one multiplayer map was all it took to hint at the vastness we anticipate will engulf action gamers when *Resistance 2* ships later this year. While we didn't get hands-on with the single-player game or the extensive co-op portion, or even see the full extent of the 60-player multiplayer battles raging, the part we played illustrated some incredibly cool features. Though you can walk across the large map to other areas, the game design leads you to stick with your six-man squad and earn points and rank for achieving team-based objectives. Right from the outset your squad has a rival on the other side, highlighted by a star and color indicator on each member. You score more points for killing those guys, and beating them to objectives. In a nod to new players, helping them be productive as their skills develop, you score points for inflicting damage on an enemy, not just for kills. As Insomniac president Ted Price explained "experienced players will often swoop in to get kills on damaged opponents, and even their teammates can lose out…we want everyone to have a chance to contribute to the squad's objectives." As you stay alive and score more points through damaging enemies, getting kills, and securing location-based objectives you'll get a star level symbol over your head (up to four stars currently) that establishes you to the enemy as a badass who should now be the target of their assaults.

The visuals were still under construction according to Price, as the focus of the team has been to get the gameplay working so that it can be tweaked and polished to perfection while the textures and character designs also go through their iterations.

With a track record that has already scored incredible success on PlayStation 3, Insomniac has quickly become THE developer of note on the platform. It ships products when it says it will, and with a style that shows total dedication to polishing each release to perfection. *Resistance 2* will be the company's biggest game to date, and we'll bring you more details on every part of this epic-in-the-making very soon. RS





Alone In The Dark

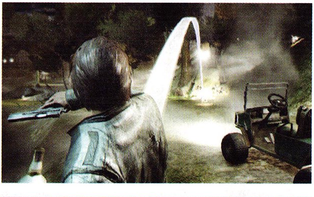
PS3/PS2 AVAILABLE: Fall GENRE: Horror/Adventure PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Eden Studios

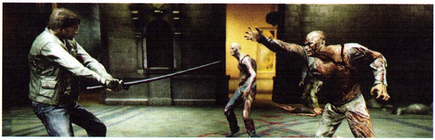
That's right—no Roman numeral sequel designation, no goofy subtitles: Eden Studios is flat-out calling the newest "Carnby Chronicles" installment *Alone in the Dark,* just like it's the only one there's ever been (perhaps in an attempt to blot out the memory of the unfortunate *Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare).* The team is certainly going in some new, intriguing directions.

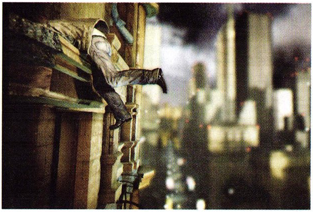
The setup: A plague of darkness and monsters (and surreal scars that race and zigzag through the very walls of buildings like bad dreams of sutures gone wrong) has landed in present-day New York City—and Central Park and its high-profile boundary streets are Ground Zero.

Edward Carnby, one of the unluckiest guys in the world, starts off the game with all hell breaking loose around him: the buildings bordering Central Park are literally coming apart at the seams, and the radical new cinematic approach leaves you scrambling through rooms with cracking, heaving floors that send landslides of office furniture and debris smashing through crumbling walls to tumble down to monster-infested Central Park below.

The heat and light of fire is Darkness' worst enemy, and a new dynamic scheme lets fire spread freely—from a makeshift chair-leg torch, to any nearby furniture, to the very walls and ceilings (four words: Alcohol Doused Flaming Bullets!). Taking a cue from TV hits like *Lost,* the new *AITD* story is broken into stand-alone, DVD-style "chapters," which can be temporarily skipped if you get stuck (however, the climactic segment/endgame will not be accessible until a certain percentage of the game has been completed). CH



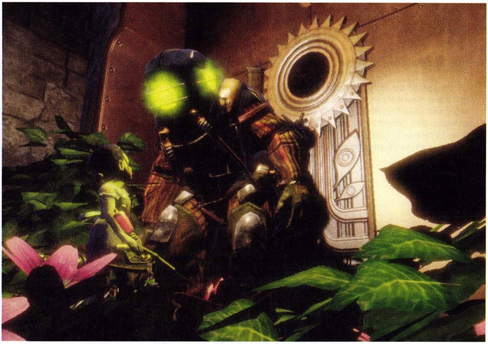




BioShock

PS3 AVAILABLE: October GENRE: Action/RPG
PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: 2K Marin

Surprising absolutely no one, the PC and Xbox 360 exclusive (and for many Xbots, the game of the year) has finally been announced for PS3. A hybrid shooter/RPG, *BioShock* is set deep beneath the ocean's surface in a disturbing underwater city that's your typical utopian metropolis gone wrong—except absolutely nothing is typical in either the gameplay or the story. We hear rumors of some limited upgraded content along with DVD-like extras, but even without anything new *BioShock* is already a must-play (assuming they get the port right, which they should). The story will disturb you, the action will engage you, and the overall package will expand your notion of what a videogame can be. We can't wait. GS



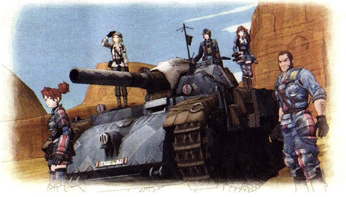
RAPTURE METRO

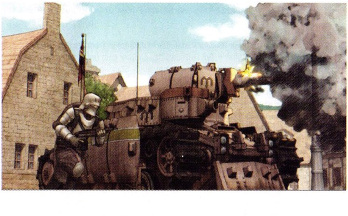
FARMER'S MARKET

Valkyria Chronicles

PS3 AVAILABLE: November GENRE: RPG PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Sega

Dear Sega,
Thank you kindly for having the courage to bring over to the U.S. this profoundly Japanese RPG. In an era where U.S. developers are crafting these so-called role-playing games—y'know, the kind where you create your own story—well…I miss those linear narratives and predefined characters. Ugh, I know that could come out wrong, but really, I mean it, I do. Still, I'm glad you're not just sticking with the same old tactical gameplay. You were totally for real when you told me the turn-based battles play out a bit like a third-person action game. For example, I dig how you can use your command points like a "gas tank," moving in real time and even shooting and dodging enemy fire. It's ultra neat. Plus, your game looks supercool and stylish—which is what I'd expect from my new crush! Yeah, I said it. Gosh, I hope *Valkyria Chronicles* lives up to my affections. Ah well, I'll find out soon enough…
Sincerely, GS



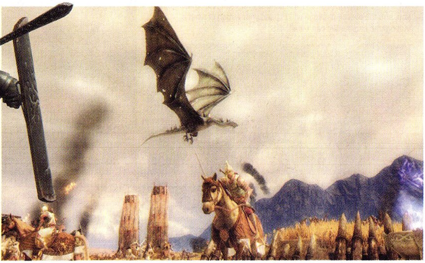


PlayStation Gallery

Lord of the Rings: Conquest

PS3 AVAILABLE: Holiday GENRE: Action/Adventure PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: Pandemic Studios

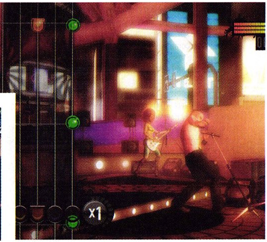
The team behind the *Star Wars Battlefront* games is bringing that action gameplay to the *Lord of the Rings* franchise with a new game that puts you at the pointy end of all the major battles. From Helm's Deep, through Minas Tirith, and with promised battles with Sauron you'll be able to bring three friends along for four-player co-op action through the campaign. Both sides of the battle can be fought, so you'll actually be able to play the forces of darkness (and take the battle all the way to Rivendell). Some of the game mechanics in our first viewing were relatively straightforward, but the opportunity to fire catapults and fight Oliphaunts should appeal to the legion of *Rings* fans. RS

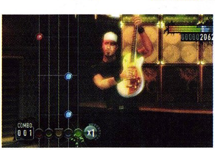


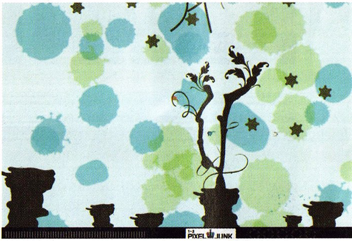
Rock Revolution

PS3 AVAILABLE: Fall GENRE: Music PUBLISHER: Konami Digital Entertainment DEVELOPER: Zoe Mode/HB Studios

The publisher of hit music franchises *Guitar Freaks, Beatmania,* and *Dance Dance Revolution* is a little late to the next-gen rhythm game scene; but Konami is finally releasing its answer to *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero. Rock Revolution* will feature a guitar, a bass, and a drum (no vocals), but the spotlight is on the unique drum set. With six pads and a kick pedal, *Rock Revolution's* kit will have the most "bang"-able parts on the market come the holiday season. You'll be able to rock through approximately 40 songs, including the titles "Somebody Told Me," "All the Small Things," and "Dirty Little Secret," as you progress through one of the game's two career modes (one for the guitar/bass and one solely for drums) or participate in three- to six-player co-op and competitive modes. TD



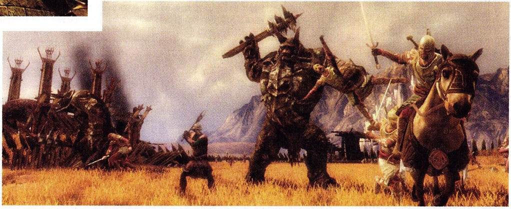




PixelJunk Eden

PS3/PSN AVAILABLE: Late 2008 GENRE: Puzzle/Strategy PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: Q-Games

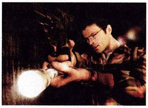
Like we need another *PixelJunk* addiction to distract us from the day job of producing this magazine. But Q-Games has another gem readying for distraction if our brief hands-on with *Eden* is any indication. Starring Grimps (named for their control method of gripping and jumping) you'll be co-operatively pollinating flowers in your own Garden of Eden. These colorful little characters can grip onto the branches of plants and swing on a silk rope to collect the pollen needed to seed new flowers that open up different areas. Classic co-op bonuses for combos with other players help the collaborative spirit, as does the ability to grab your buddies to help them out of trouble (or knock them into it). It's quirky, deceptively simple, yet the areas we played of the 10 total levels shipping with the game were plenty to get across the message that this colorful co-op experience could have even broader appeal than *PixelJunk Monsters.* Our deadlines will suffer. RS

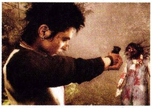


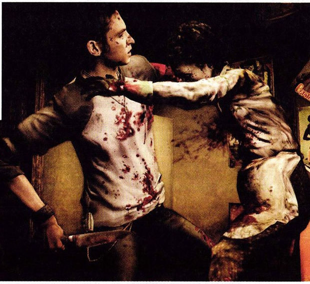
Siren: Blood Curse

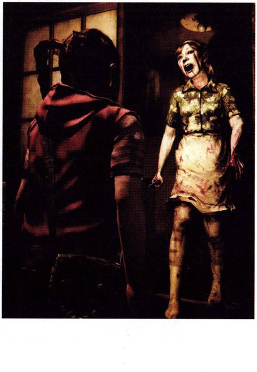
PS3 AVAILABLE: Late 2008 GENRE: Horror/Adventure PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: Japan Studios

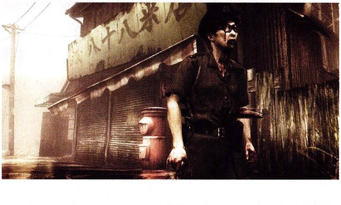
The seven members of a U.S. film crew stranded in a mysterious Japanese village in *Siren: Blood Curse* couldn't have picked a worse location. The place is crawling with zombies—Japanese zombies—and that's promised to be just the start of the mystery. This downloadable, episodic game design is truly intriguing for several reasons. Most obviously is the episodic delivery that will tell this story over 12 installments that individually will take two to three hours to complete. Less apparent is the impressive visual style that clearly distinguishes *Siren* as a distinctly high-ambition release. The grainy look and steadicam delivery, along with the dark shadows of abandoned mineshafts and dimly lit rooms provide the ideal backdrop for terrifying moments. Your team is armed for shooting film, not denizens of the undead, so scrabbling for weapons will be vital. Rumble feedback for DualShock 3 controllers and Sixaxis functions (shaking the controller to throw off a clawing attack) add more high-end interactivity to the experience. We'll be sure to follow the seven characters' stories (told concurrently along the same timeline in each episode) when the game hits the PlayStation Store later in the year. RS

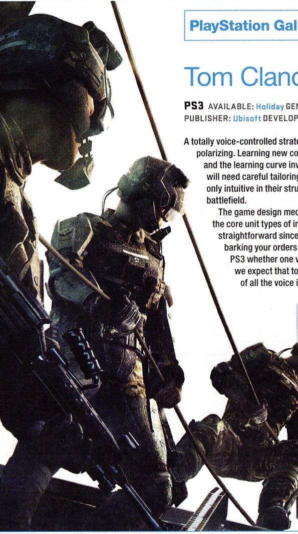












PlayStation Gallery

Tom Clancy's EndWar

PS3 AVAILABLE: Holiday GENRE: Strategy
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Shanghai

A totally voice-controlled strategy game is not only ambitious, it's potentially polarizing. Learning new control dynamics is never an easy sell to gamers, and the learning curve involved in yelling at your units to move and attack will need careful tailoring. However, in our playtest the commands weren't only intuitive in their structure, but they were obviously effective on the battlefield.

The game design mechanic is classic rock-paper-scissors between the core unit types of infantry, tanks, and transports. It has to be that straightforward since you'll take some time working out the format of barking your orders. The Bluetooth headset (it's still not confirmed for PS3 whether one will be packaged with the shipping game, though we expect that to be the case) picks up around 90- to 95-percent of all the voice inputs. Commands are simple enough after you've designated a number to a group of units. "2 Attack D" sends whatever units you designated as 2 to attack the target (enemy units or installations). Call out 2 Camera and the camera will follow your guys. That's vital when you have five or more unit groups and you have to send them in different directions. The pace can certainly get hectic, but we were also thrown in at the deep end for demo purposes, and the learning curve is designed to be a smooth introduction of all the commands and unit types before the crazy, full-featured battles are fought.

It's important to note that all the commands can be input with the controller, so you don't have to use the voice input, but with the mechanic designed around this unique style, you'd be missing out on most of the originality. Having these modern military units at your literal beck and call is certainly original and surprisingly functional, and we're looking forward to spending more time "voice on" in the coming months. RS

Sonic Unleashed

PS3 AVAILABLE: Holiday GENRE: Action PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Sonic Team

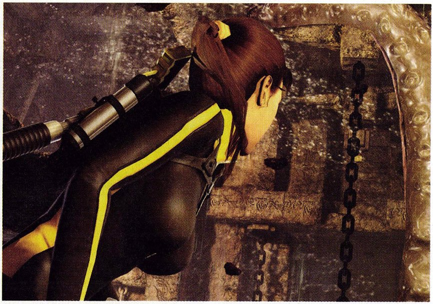
Some games look great in screenshots. Others have to be seen to be believed. *Sonic Unleashed* falls into the latter category. Blazingly fast action set in real-world locales—this is classic 2D Sonic action with some very pretty 3D backgrounds. In a recent demo, I couldn't stop staring as the game's producer flew through Mykonos, zipping through miles and miles of landscape, bouncing off buildings, flinging against foes, careening through the air…simply mesmerizing. Although the game is ostensibly an action/adventure experience, the adventure is downplayed for the sake of classic action. Sure, you can head into town and interact with other characters, but you can also bypass the town altogether and jump right into the actual levels. Daytime levels are reminiscent of the 2D original; nighttime levels (which we have yet to see) will focus on combat. GS

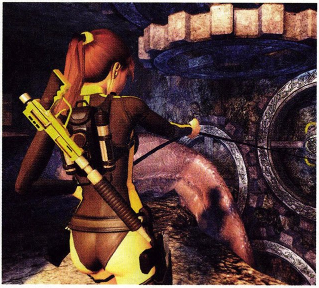
Tomb Raider Underworld

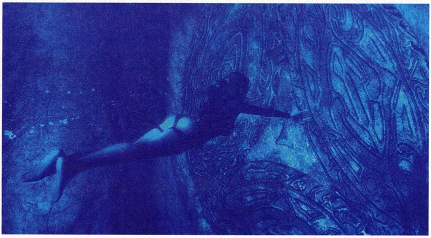
PS3 AVAILABLE: Holiday GENRE: Adventure PUBLISHER: Eidos
DEVELOPER: Crystal Dynamics

We're ready for a return to spelunking form, and with *Underworld* this classic series' new keepers at Crystal Dynamics are changing up key elements while aiming to remain true to the gameplay that made Lara Croft the identifying icon of the videogame age on her debut. The change surrounds the underground location, the seabed of the Mediterranean, where Lara's father had uncovered a site before going missing and turning up dead. That means scuba gear (suitably form-fitting) and spear gun to dissuade the attendant sharks from making Lara lunch.

Though still rough in spots, with animations still to be ironed out (motion-capture is being used for the first-time in the series, replacing the hand-animated method), the use of a PDA with a built-in camera for taking (and possibly uploading) photos hinted at new gameplay mechanics. Adrenaline Moments are designed to provide a cinematic camera angle to cool events where you'll have enough control over Lara to help avoid potentially deadly situations. This method means no timed button press moments (à la *God of War* and *Heavenly Sword)* in favor of more control. We'll see how it plays out in the months ahead. RS



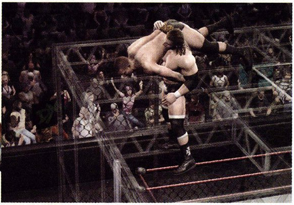


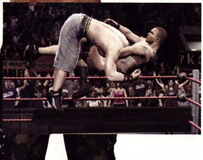


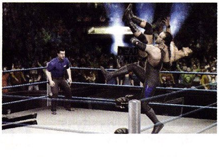
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009

PS3/PSN AVAILABLE: November
GENRE: Wrestling/Fighting PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Yuke's Media Creations

We finally got hands-on with some of the new features this latest *Smackdown* brawler is bringing to the canvas. The new Tag Team system—which places a greater emphasis on teamwork and ensures the wrestler who's not in the ring is still engaged in the action—works as well in practice as it does in theory. The Create-A-Finisher mode is very user-friendly and does indeed contain a great deal of depth, allowing you to use up to 10 moves in one finisher (don't worry, damage dealt by a finishing move is determined by a fighter's abilities, not the length of the move) and adjust the speed of each individual step. And the brand-new Inferno Match looks, well, hot. For a series that already enjoys a big following, these effective upgrades should satisfy fans and even encourage wrestling newbies to give it a try. SB







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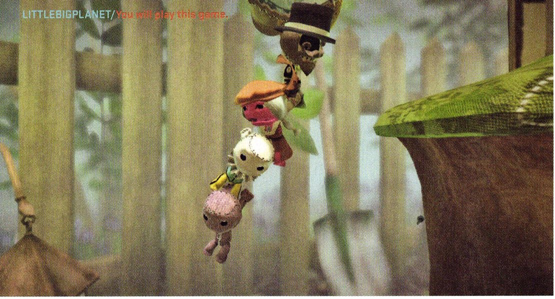
PS3 | Release Date: October | Publisher: SCEA | Developer: Media Molecule

EVERY PS3 OWNER WILL PLAY THIS GAME. WE TELL YOU WHY!

By ROB SMITH

"WHAT IS FUN?"

Good question. A very, very good question to ask if you're working in the game space. Of course, it's been oft-asked and seldom satisfactorily answered. But it formed the basis of new studio Media Molecule's pitch to get their creative game concept signed, funded, and ultimately published. According to the game's U.S. producer, Kyle Shubel, SCE's president of worldwide studios (at the time), Phil Harrison, recognized the potential genius (or simply understood the fellow Englishmen's accents), and signed *LittleBigPlanet* into development exclusively for PS3. Good move.



In a new addition, signposts will indicate where you will need at least two, three, or four players to access a particular area. These locations won't be necessary to complete the level, but they will store special bonuses that you'll want to collect, like mini-games and objects for use in your own levels.

Were you really expecting to see pole-dancing meerkats?

That initial pitch was supported by a video that posed the elusive question, but also tried to answer it. Fun, defined. According to Shubel this presentation focused on people having fun, casually. It incorporated social interactions, sitting on the couch with buddies, snowboarding, hanging out. It presented the environment that would allow *LittleBigPlanet* to capture the essence of fun gameplay blended with social interaction.

Every tweak, change, and decision made in the seemingly ever-expanding development schedule has been to further that objective.

It's fascinating, then, that with each iteration *LittleBigPlanet* displays features and functions deeper, more complex, more "hardcore" than its initially prescribed simplicity. Over a year ago, at SCEA's Gamer's Day, the first hands-on with *LittleBigPlanet* revealed a game that oozed cute from every fabric stitch of the stylized, user-defined sack characters. Manipulating the character's arms using the Left and Right triggers, moving the head around with the Sixaxis control (now with added hip controls, so you can shimmy from the waist) was a simple joy in itself. Jumping through the English Garden level, collecting the world's currency of sponge (if you felt like it), grabbing objects (and each other) in four-player co-operative fun-ness caused gamers of all ages and stripes to grin like kids. I know, because I was one of them, beguiled by its simple charms.

That same level is quite different today. Though the gameplay remains true at its heart, the experience feels different now due to the addition of new elements, floating characters, and tweaked puzzles, along with the removal of the Polaroid snapshot that captured the joy of launching on the skateboard through the finish line. It's hard to say this change is for the best—though it's certainly not for the worst—but it illustrates the perpetual feature creep that this powerful, creatively driven toolset and engine can provide. One day, we hope soon, *LittleBigPlanet* will be finished to the point of being shipped…and then the real fun can begin.

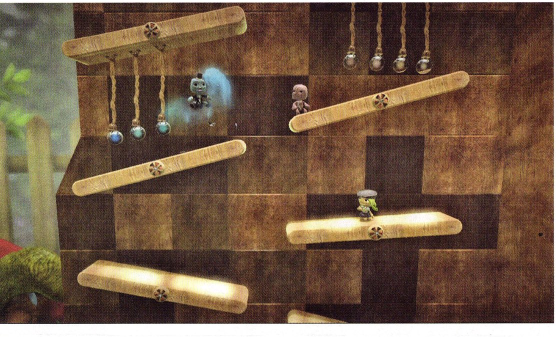
PLAY!

Even at this point the exact storyline that drives the experience through the 50 planned levels is being kept under wraps. In part that's due to some overly rigorous secrecy, but as Shubel suggests, it's also because the ongoing iterative process afoot inside Media Molecule's team means that it simply isn't set. What's clear is that you start in your sack character's pod—a sort of spacey location that you can customize with patterns and stickers (the kind on which you can paste images captured using the PlayStation Eye)—and look out at CraftEarth, the home of all the levels set in regions around the world. Up to three levels will be open for you to try. Each can be played alone or with up to three other buddies.

Starting off, your primary goal will be the collection of "fluff" (formerly sponge, then puff, now, though not finalized, known as fluff), and you'll be ranked at a bronze, silver, or gold level depending on how well you do, giving you plenty of motivation to replay levels if you don't achieve gold. Then, from one to three new levels will open up for you to try, potentially in different regions. So while you might start in England, you can end up in parts of Europe, Africa, and elsewhere.

After completing a few levels, an intriguing new option will be available: the ability to choose a Player or Creator path. The Player path is designed to take you through the levels that reveal the storyline. The Creator path will direct you down levels that let you unlock new items and objects that you want to acquire and accrue to use in your own level designs.

As mentioned, the storyline isn't exactly clear, but we're pretty sure it will be inventive. What makes us say that? Were you really expecting to see pole-dancing meerkats? We're not kidding. An objective to rescue baby meerkat and return



Jumping in to join a game is as simple as hitting the PS button. If a friend comes over mid-level, just hit PS and you'll be working co-operatively right away.

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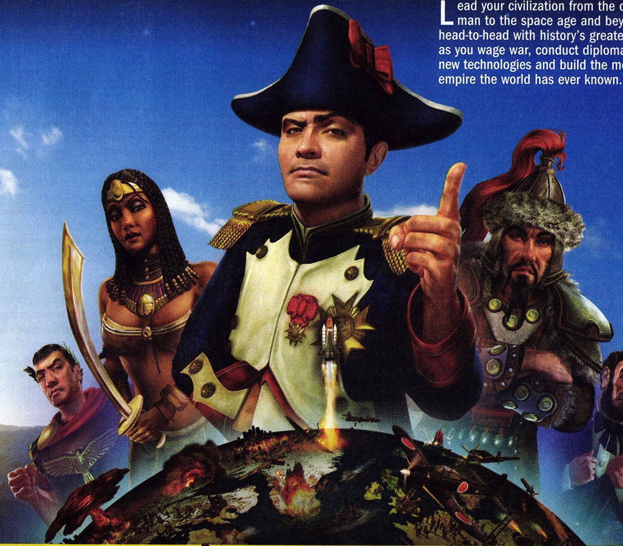

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it to momma meerkat might seem overtly cutesy, but it's not without danger to your sack boys and girls. The addition of a piston mechanic to the physics model (also available for use in your own levels) allows for meerkats to pop up from their holes, sending you sailing through the air if you linger over a hole at appropriate time. This device gets you hopping through the vertically designed meerkat warren, giving you access to areas that a simple jump won't let you reach.

DANGER, DANGER, SACKBOY

LittleBigPlanet's cute style disguises some keen gameplay challenges. Aside from straight puzzles (where to go next, how to get there), the addition of dangers really amps up the challenge. You might have already seen grim, green poison gas, searing-hot fire pits, and electrical currents that zap you like an X-ray machine (none are instant death if you touch them; you have a fraction of a second to leap out of harm's way), but the newly revealed ice effect is as, *ahem,* cool as it is deadly. Step on the ice for too long and you'll be encased in a cube, at which point you have a few seconds to frantically shake the Sixaxis controller to bust out of this potential frozen tomb.

One level set in Russia takes full advantage of the slippery physics effects imbued by an icy surface. Jumping aboard a sled, you careen down ramps at high speed, over jumps that require you to use the Sixaxis to keep the sled level so it hits the next ramp without losing speed. The speed is intense, and the replayability is surprisingly subtle as you'll whizz past fluff that you know you'll be able to collect…but how? You'll have to replay a few times to see if a different path down the mountain is available.

Trial and error will be a huge part of the creative process.

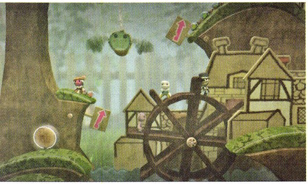
CREATE!

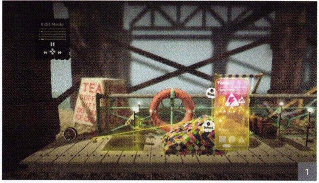
With each addition, the potential for incredible *LBP* creations of your own devising expands exponentially. No doubt it also adds to the learning curve you'll need to crest to muster the kind of creativity on display from Media Molecule's own levels. To help you out, a number of the in-game levels will be available for you to tweak. Simply copy the level, then paste it to your *LittleBigMoon* (the location of all your levels-in-progress). Each save file is just 200k to 400k in size, so space shouldn't be an issue (unless you use the PS Eye to snap and import a huge number of your own photos).

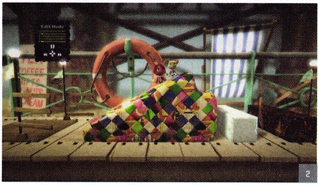
Trial and error will be a huge part of the creative process. You're not completely on your own, though; video tutorials scattered around various levels will show you how to create what you're seeing on the screen. No doubt when you see something cool—like the rampaging bull that chases you through one level—you'll want to know how it was done. These tutorials should help. In addition, you'll be able to copy particular elements out of these levels, and save them in your Pop-It (the interface that gives you access to all the menu options of customization and create tools). Though again it has yet to be determined, the number of save slots in your Pop-It will be limited (we're guessing it'll

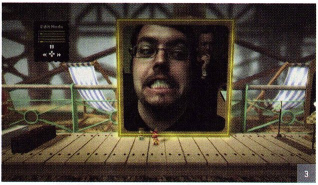
The Media Molecule team consists of just 28 people (with additional testing support inside Sony). "Sitting down with the five original team members was just mind-blowing," says Producer Kyle Shubel of initial meetings with the creative visionaries who pitched the project.

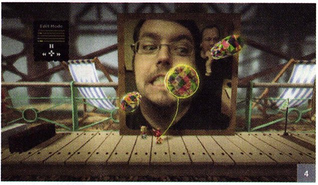
If you get stuck in a level (more likely in your own designs as you're testing and tweaking), you can commit sack boy suicide. Your fella holds his breath until he literally bursts in a puff of stitches before respawning at the nearest point.

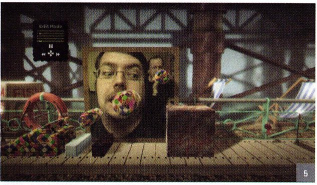












KYLEROBLEVEL

1. Starting off our level we used the beachfront background. Then we placed a starting gate so that our level would be a timed race.
2. We built a ramp by building a solid block, then copying it, rotating the copy to an angle, then using that copy to delete most of the original shape! It was easier to do than that sounds.
3. Using the PS Eye we snapped a picture of Kyle, with Rob in the background looking confused, or pensive, or, no, it was confused. Use your own images in levels sparingly as each upload has a 5MB size cap. Levels using the provided textures will probably only clock in at around 200k to 400k.
4. The edit mode box (top left) tracks how many objects and textures your level is using to gauge if you're approaching memory capacity. Larger levels and imported textures will eat into your allotted space footprint. Those simple cylinders are bolted onto the background, and then given properties such as spin direction and speed.
5. The grey box has the electricity effect applied, and the lava texture indicates a fire block. Our level requires you to run up the ramp, jump, and grab on to the spinning cylinder, using the motion to propel you over the danger. Just after this shot we placed an icy area, forcing you to stay airborne over the cylinders, or fall onto the ice where you'll be encased in a solid cube in seconds (though shaking the Sixaxis to bust out of the frozen block is cool in itself).

No doubt when you see something cool—like the rampaging bull that chases you through one level—you'll want to know how it was done.

come in at about a dozen). If that's not enough for a particular design, you can always save your level, open another, swap out your save slot items and objects, and bring them with you into the new creation. Expect expert creators to have a level that's a pure object gallery—all the pieces they've created or copied, stored in one mish-mash place as a toolbox.

To help tell a story you'll be able to place whiteboards with text details in your level (we saw this in the developer levels, explaining the story and objectives behind the meerkat rescue, for example). With a starting gate, finish line, and video screen placed, your level will automatically provide ranks and scores. Getting all the components correctly placed, the physics to your liking, and each challenge and puzzle perfected will take time, but you'll be able to publish your levels for friends to beta test, and lock any or all parts of it so that other users can't manipulate it. To assist the editing process, the VCR effect lets you pause the world physics (meaning make-shift cars won't roll off into the distance while you build other parts, for example) and even "rewind," essentially undoing your last action.

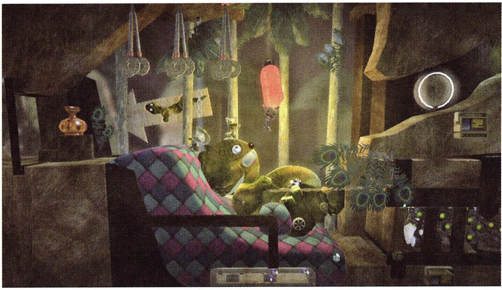
In our playtest using the tools, we took a while to get used to the location of objects in the Pop-It, as well as the placement of them on the world. Though levels look like they're on a 2D plane, they actually have three depth levels, requiring you to stick objects to the rear background to prevent physics taking over and them simply falling to the ground. While the developers raced through the building, sizing, rotating, and placing of blocks in the Pop-It menu like it's second nature, it's trickier than they make it look! Throw in the new physics additions of pistons (which power the head-popping meerkats) and now rockets, along with their variety of uses—and just getting your head around the possibilities will be job one for level creators. Job two will be actually developing a plan, as the white canvas of a blank level is oddly intimidating. When you consider that your level is a personal representation of your own unique creativity, you can't help but feel the pressure to try to do something spectacular!

It's worth noting that you don't need to create levels that are straight platformers and puzzlers. What about telling a joke through creative use of stickers, whiteboard text, and more? How about telling a story, a fairy tale, a parable? Producer Kyle Shubel already has his heart set on recreating the classic adventure game *Pitfall*—pits, traps, even swinging ropes can be built fairly simply with these broad-ranging tools.

THE GO! TEAM
THUNDER, LIGHTNING, STRIKE

The Go! Team

The original *LittleBigPlanet* demo was accompanied by a catchy, haunting tune that many people thought was created in-house by Media Molecule. In fact, the track is licensed from a band called The Go! Team. Called "Get It Together" (from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike*), the track is available through iTunes (and other music download sites), but the remainder of the album is also worth hearing for its blend of catchy pop riffs. This obscure band has certainly benefited from the exposure, as the video accompaniment to the single release—which you can see through YouTube—features comments almost exclusively about its use in the game.



Behind the scenes, moderators will be able to bump up certain levels they consider particularly worth checking out.

SHARE!

Of course, other potential extensions of the level creation tools have posed questions the games industry hasn't had to face before. Since you can take a picture of anything, like…anything, what happens when you see a Sackboy who's, well, y'know, stickered with, er, a sack...boy. "Can I create a forest of penises?" one observer asked Shubel during his tour showcasing the game. Well, you can, if you must. But to ensure objectionable material is not freely available to all users, any player will be able to "grief" a level, instantly removing it from download and flagging it for assessment by SCEA's customer service team. Only one person needs to grief a level to have it removed, but serial griefers will also be flagged, and their ability to grief can be removed by the moderators.

A more fascinating conundrum faced by SCEA and the game's moderators is the use of copyright material, even if used by the copyright holders. If I'm, say, the VP of Marketing at McDonalds, I'd take pictures of my Golden Arches, import them into a level as stickers, and craft an interactive ad for my brand. What happens then? According to Shubel a user would have to grief the level for it to be brought to SCEA's attention, but then a decision—currently unclear—has to be made of what to do. It may not be offensive, but does a level like that imply Sony or SCEA's endorsement of another company's brand or products. Taking it one step further, what if the VP of Marketing at Microsoft created an Xbox-themed level? And why shouldn't Sony Pictures use *LittleBigPlanet* to market a new movie through an interactive recreation of the next *Spider-Man*, for example?

Parallels to MySpace, Facebook, and perhaps more relevantly, online game *Second Life* are readily apparently. Bands are an obvious target for creating levels themed after their style. Aside from music created by Media Molecule, the game will ship with songs licensed from a wide variety of bands. Better yet, a mini-music mixer tool will let you manipulate those tracks, picking out certain elements for use in your own levels. Music packs are also an obvious target for downloadable content that Shubel confirmed would be part of the long-term *LBP* strategy.

Though just a few months from shipping it does seem a number of fairly important questions about the process, outline, and direction of *LittleBigPlanet's* many facets remain undetermined. Aside from illustrating the evolving, iterative creative style of the tight-knit development studio housed in Guildford, England, it also reflects the level of originality the game delivers on an industry-wide scale. Many of these questions simply haven't been asked before, let alone answered. "Figuring out those questions is why the game hasn't shipped yet," chuckles Shubel.

Yet, these kinds of creative conundrums are exactly why *LBP* is such a big deal. What started as a concept dream is now nearing ship-reality; *LittleBigPlanet's* ambition, creativity, style, and potential peg it as probably the most important game releasing on PlayStation 3 this year. That's why you need to know about it, and that's why you'll discover the definition of fun when it finally releases on Blu-ray in October. ■

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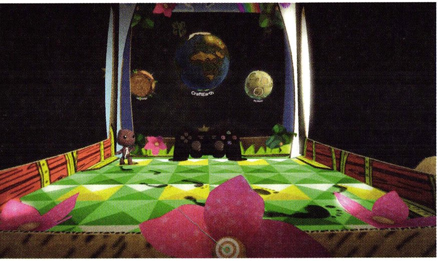
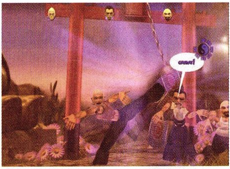


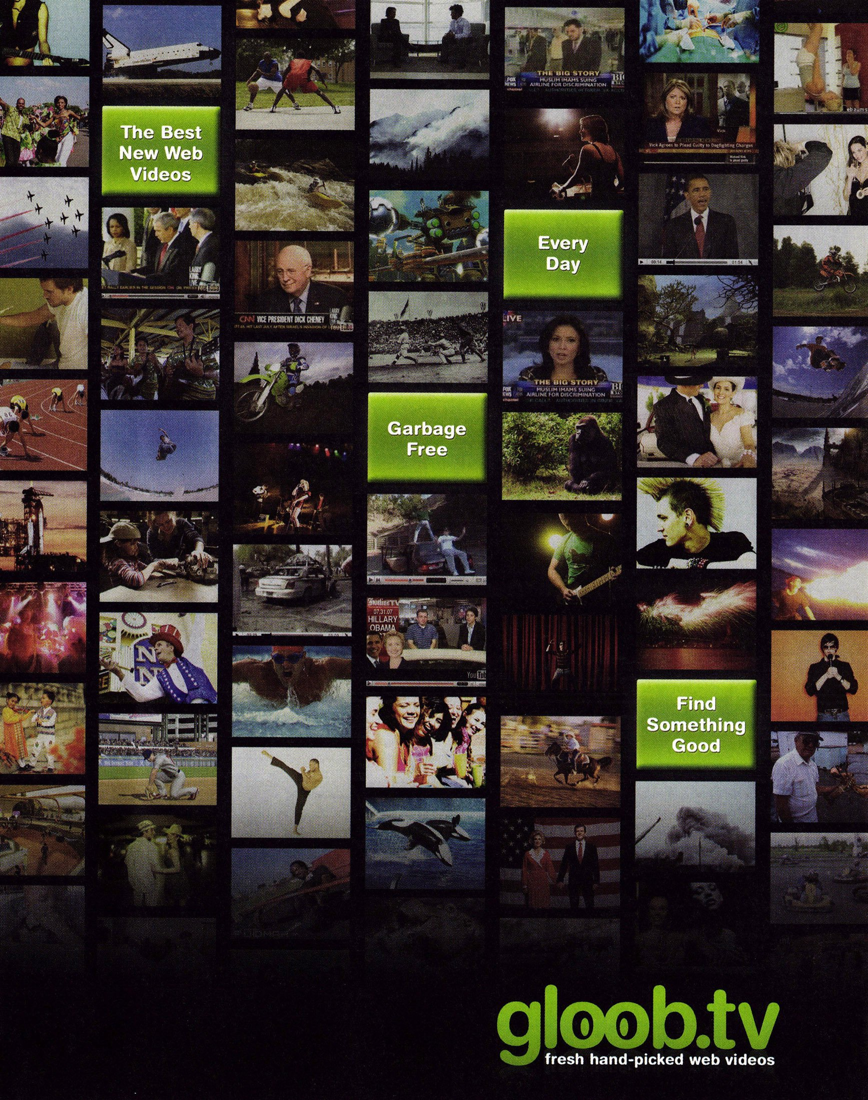
From the pod you can see another satellite on the left. Currently named the fridge (and likely to be changed before release), this is where you'll access all the "web 2.0" functions of level tagging, comments, and checking out the Media Molecule picks of the best levels published by users.

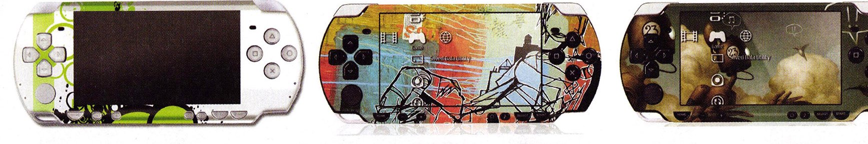


Rag Doll Kung-fu

Once upon a time (around 2005, in fact), Media Molecule's current creative director, Mark Healey, concocted a unique game idea that he unveiled at the Game Developer's Conference that year. A fascinating physics model powered a genuinely creative artistic style, and the gameplay mechanics were simple but eminently entertaining. It all seemed so simple, but the quick sign-up by Valve Software, to be available for download through Steam, helped catapult the game into the minds of a large audience.

As the adage goes, from small acorns do mighty oaks grow (really, it does, feel free to try it yourselves), and from those humble beginnings the concept for the game *LittleBigPlanet* emerged. *Rag Doll Kung-fu* is still available for the PC savvy among you, and if you want to see some of the team's inspiration that lead ultimately to *LBP*, check it out.


The Best New Web Videos
Every Day
Garbage Free
Find Something Good
gloob.tv
fresh hand-picked web videos



DRESS TO IMPRESS

Is your PSP ready to HIT THE STREETS?

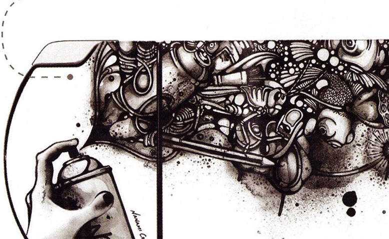
>>by Teresa Dun

Beauty is only skin deep—when you're nose-to-the-screen, thumbs deep in *God of War: Chains of Olympus,* all that matters is the code chugging away within the system. You're probably oblivious to what your PlayStation Portable is wearing.

But when your bus swerves to avoid a jaywalking squirrel, the right outfit could save you from a disfiguring scratch across the back of your system—and a bucketful of tears.

PSP owners have traditionally avoided covering their handheld with adhesive-based skins. Some gamers dig the pristine purity of their naked system. Fair enough. But others are simply repulsed by the notion. What if the skin fits awkwardly, like a *Metal Gear* game on a non-PlayStation system? What if it leaves behind a sticky residue? Or worst of all, what if it voids the PSP warranty?!

I was curious to find the answer, so I procured a selection of PSP skins currently on the market and tested them to determine which ones were aesthetically pleasing, comfortable to use, easy to install, strong enough to shield your system from scratches, and ultimately worth your money. None of the skins on these pages will void your warranty.



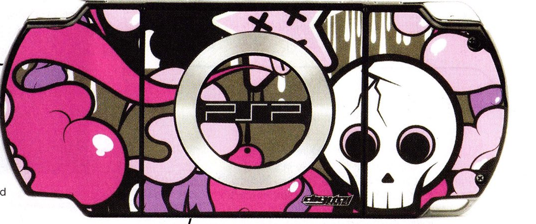
Digital Camo

A Progression in Expression

www.digitalcamoskins.net

DIGITAL CAMO OFFERS... PSP skins for $12.99 each. For an extra $4.99, you can add your name to the skin in one of seven fonts. Shipping starts at $9.00. Digital Camo also offers skins for your PS3 and guitar controllers.

Digital Camo currently only offers a few dozen designs, but more are in the works.

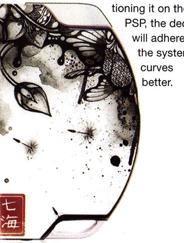


You can kind of see it on the page: the skin has a matte texture that adds a luminscent (though not glaring) shine.

THE SKIN LOOKS... solid, sturdy, and vivid in color. The plastic-like nature of the skin allows it to retain vibrant hues, and the matte texture means the design doesn't cause a glare under bright lights.

WHEN I RUN MY FINGERS OVER THE SKIN, IT FEELS LIKE... the surface of a plastic milk container but with a smoother texture. Digital Camo calls it a "satin finish," and the tiny ridges in the texture prevented my PSP from slipping from my fingers. The skin is stiffer and heavier than the other skins, and probably about half the thickness of a thumbnail.

Upon extended use, the material chafed my (admittedly delicate) fingers and palms. The downside of the skin's sturdiness is that it has sharp edges, which irritated the area between my index and middle fingers. But if you use a hairdryer to heat the skin when positioning it on the PSP, the decal will adhere to the system's curves better.



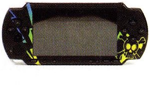
INSTALLING THE SKIN... is like playing the old Operation board game: it has lots of small pieces and punishes you if you don't have steady hands.

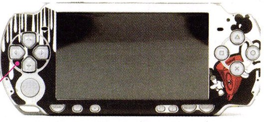
The front of the skin consists of one big piece and two smaller ones that go on the inside of the D-pad and face button pad. The back has five parts, cut so you can see the PSP letters and silver ring.

Though the pieces look separate, when I peeled them off the backing, the perforation wasn't clean. Because I had to tug to detach pieces from each other, some of the lines (especially at corners) were jagged and uneven.

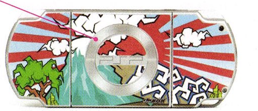
During installation, my clumsy fingers created air bubbles and crinkles. Unfortunately, no matter how much I tried, the bubbles were too persistent for me to smooth out.

WHEN I SCRATCHED THE SKIN WITH MY CAR KEY... it didn't leave any sort of mark... at all...until my 12th furious stroke. No snags, no white scratch marks, no nicks, practically no trace at all. The thin dent it finally left can only be seen when I angled it toward the light, and even then, the design wasn't marred.

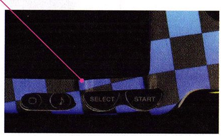




Installing the pieces inside the button pads were a pain. They leave a nice PSP-colored circle, though, assuming you can install the pieces evenly.



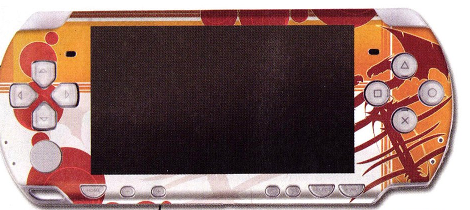
The PSP letters and silver circle are nice...but to install them properly, you'll need brain surgeon hands.



Ugh, curse my awkward fingers! Not only are these bumps unsightly, but they interfere with the Select and Start buttons, too.

REMOVING THE SKIN... left no marks and no sticky residue. My stripped PSP was as pristine as the day I bought it.

BUY THIS SKIN IF... you want maximum protection. Toss on a screen protector, and you might not even need a case for your PSP. This protection comes at a cost, though—the thick texture could irritate sensitive skin. You'll also need to enlist the help of someone with steady fingers for the installation. The shipping cost makes me cringe, too—search around for a local retailer if you don't want to pay it.



The skin fits tightly over the front of the PSP, leaving little of the original PSP showing...but only if you install it evenly.

DecalGirl

Personalize Your World

www.decalgirl.com

DECALGIRL OFFERS... PSP skins for $9.99 each; shipping starts at $2.25. Add in a HORI Protective Filter for $4.50 or a StuffBak Security ID Label for $4.95. A free matching wallpaper can be downloaded once you get your skin.

DecalGirl's website offers hundreds of PSP designs, ranging from solid colors to flower prints to anime-style characters.

THE SKIN LOOKS... like a sticker from the sticker book I had in 5th grade. The skin is simple, with a glossy finish and no other textures underneath. The coloring is made up of discrete spots, which translates to a more subdued, less vibrant color scheme.

WHEN I RUN MY FINGERS OVER THE SKIN, IT FEELS LIKE... the cover of a glossy magazine. Even without a matte or textured finish, the grip the skin offered was solid.

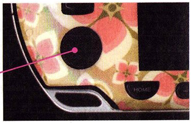
My only complaint is that the edge surrounding the analog nub was a bit sharp and sometimes trapped my thumb between the skin and analog nub.

INSTALLING THE SKIN... starts simple but requires effort.

The front is all one big piece and it was easy to position the skin over all the buttons, but when I smoothed it out, the corners crinkled up. It took some persistence to straighten the wrinkles. Amazingly, the skin resisted air bubbles.

WHEN I SCRATCHED THE SKIN WITH MY CAR KEY... it left snags but no rips. I wasn't expecting the material to be very strong because it costs less than the others, but I was pleasantly surprised. My PSP was completely unharmed underneath.

This DecalGirl design is my personal favorite. Simplicity with Eastern Asian influences.

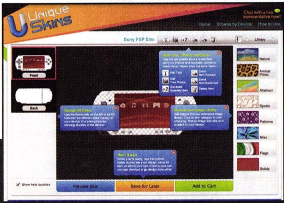


The skin that creeps up to the edge of the analog nub is hard to smooth out, so my thumb often got "caught" between the skin and the nub.

DecalGirl's designs let the PSP's silver circle show through. But unlike Digital Camo, the PSP letters are covered.

REMOVING THE SKIN... was clean and easy. The skin came off without too much resistance and left my system squeaky clean.

BUY THIS SKIN IF... you're on a budget. The DecalGirl skins aren't industrial strength, but they're more than adequate in both aesthetics and protection. They can fit awkwardly at first, but some coaxing with your fingers fixes that. If you like variety, DecalGirl's lower prices means you can swap skins every month without feeling too extravagant.



To be "You"-nique

www.uniqueskins.com

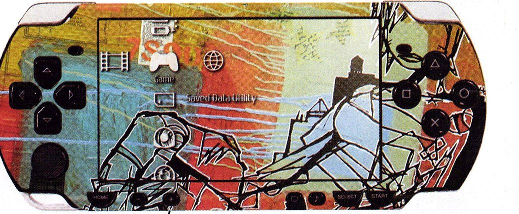
If individualizing your PSP is your primary concern, Unique Skins lets you personalize your system with your own photos and text. Each skin costs $9.99 and is similar to GelaSkins in the way they feel and install. The quality of the design depends on your artistic prowess, but if you've been hoping for a way to slap your kitten's face onto your PSP, this is a good way to do it.

GelaSkins

Protection With Style, Not Bulk

www.gelaskins.com

GELASKINS OFFERS... PSP skins for $19.95 each. Each skin includes a free screen protector and matching downloadable wallpaper. Shipping starts at $7.95 for PSP skins. GelaSkins is currently offering a special deal where you can buy four skins for the price of three.



A corresponding wallpaper can be downloaded from the site. Each skin also ships with a free screen protector.

THE SKIN LOOKS... like a work of art. Actually, it is a work of art. All of the designs at GelaSkins are the creations of classic and contemporary artists, from Van Gogh to MC Escher. The skin even covers the PSP logo on the back of the system in order to preserve the integrity of the art.

The colors are muted, but the designs are rendered clearly. A gridded crisscross texture can be seen underneath a glossy finish.

WHEN I RUN MY FINGERS OVER THE SKIN, IT FEELS LIKE... a super-thin layer of clear fingernail polish. It's smooth and dry, with just enough resistance to offer a solid grip. It's also so thin I can feel my PSP's original shape beneath it. The skin hugs the PSP tightly, and upon extended use, almost feels non-existent.

INSTALLING THE SKIN... made me feel like a skin-installing champion.

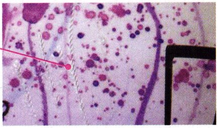
The front is all one piece, calculated with precision to allow maximum coverage while giving just enough space to not block the buttons (just look at the carefully measured circle of space around the analog nub). The back consists of three big, easy-to-install parts.

As usual, I inelegantly trapped pockets of air underneath the skin (especially around the face buttons), but I was able to smooth them out within minutes using only my fingers. This was definitely my favorite skin to install.

WHEN I SCRATCHED THE SKIN WITH MY CAR KEY... it left skid marks that spoiled the skin. Underneath, my PSP was undamaged, so while the skin itself isn't immune to injury, it does protect the system.

The measurements are perfect. I had just enough space to move the nub around without it overlapping with the skin.

Art, in the literal sense. The back consists of three pieces, so the PSP logo doesn't show though. This skin would kind of lose its impact if it did.



These scratches look like skid marks. You can feel them, too, which could be a distraction while gaming.

REMOVING THE SKIN... left a chalky white residue on my system but wasn't sticky. The residue came off easily when I wiped it with a damp cloth.

BUY THIS SKIN IF... you want your PSP to mimic a work of art. The designs are stunning. The more I look at them, the more I wish I had multiple PSPs (so they could all wear different skins), especially since the skins are so easy to install. Keep in mind that even with one of these skins, you'll still need a PSP case—if not to protect the PSP then to protect the tasteful art surrounding it. That sort of defeats the protective purpose of a skin, but if you're just looking to customize your system, GelaSkins offers dozens of intricate designs. Be prepared to spend some cash for your individuality, though. ■

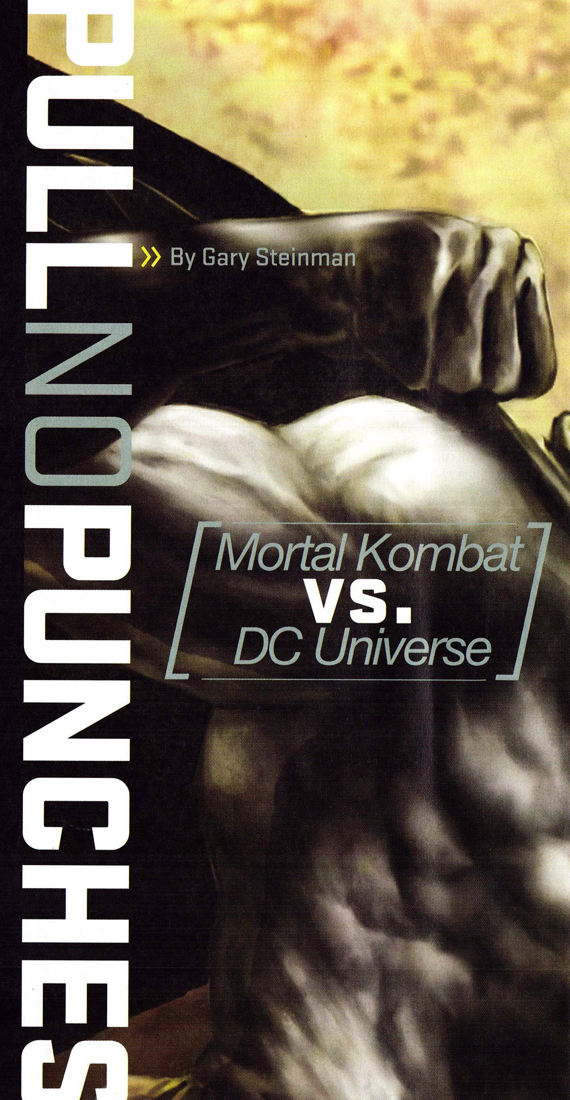
Win a PSP Skin

Want to win one of the PSP skins on this page? If so, send us a digital snapshot of your PSP in an interesting location. Maybe you're on a family vacation in Guam, or perhaps your backyard makes a perfect setting for a PSP photo session. Email the image to us at PTOM_letters@futureus.com, with the heading "Skin Thing". We'll pick a few winners and publish the best photos in an upcoming issue!

PULL NO PUNCHES

Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe

» By Gary Steinman



“IT WORKS.” I’ve just spent five hours in Midway’s Chicago headquarters, meeting with the team behind *Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe.* As I dart out the front door of the offices, I catch a glimpse of the cab driver thrumming his fingers across the dashboard, anxiously waiting to take his fare to the airport. I have a flight to make, and I’ve little time to waste thanks to Chicago’s infamously gnarly traffic. But before I have the fine pleasure of being logjammed by a sea of slow-moving cars, I’m called back. John Vogel has a point to make.

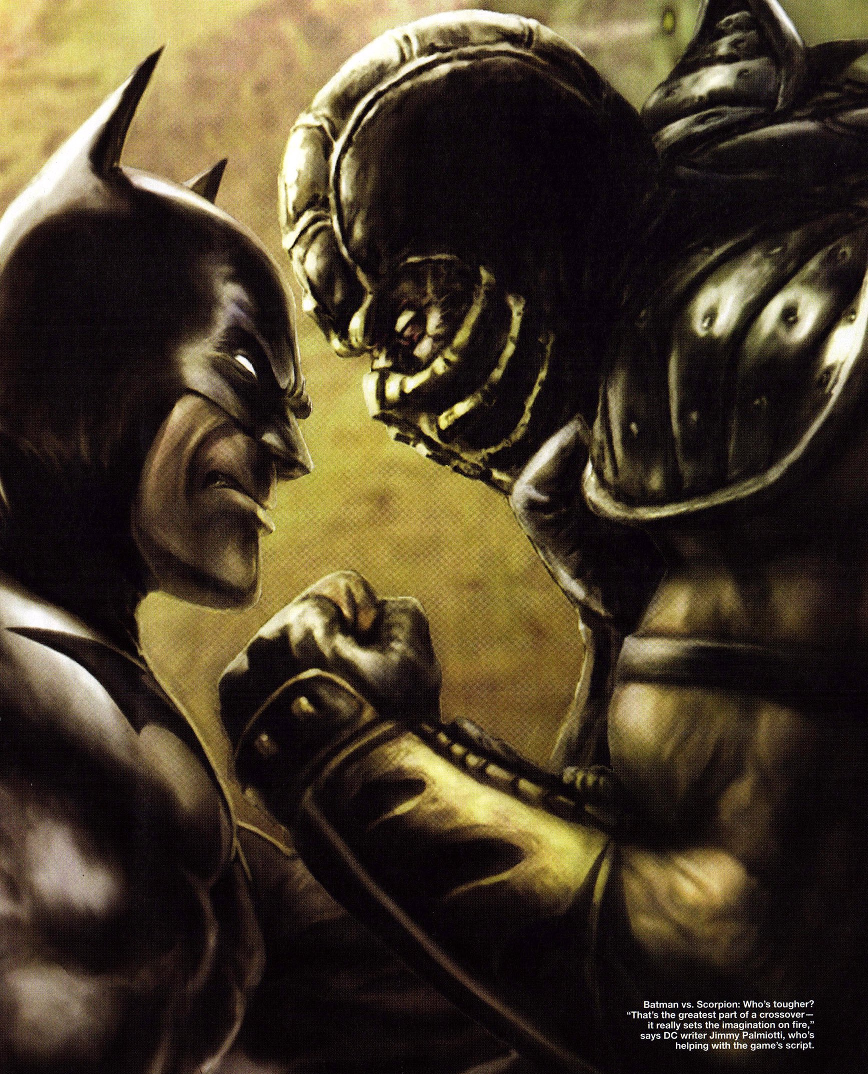
A 15-year Mortal Kombat veteran and *MKvDCU’s* story and cinematic director, Vogel’s blessed with a writer’s tongue—he knows exactly what he wants to say, but he takes his time saying it. I rush back into the conference room where we were last chatting, and he’s waiting for me. I take out my digital recorder, not wanting to miss anything he might say. Little did I know I’d be able to remember the exact quote, word for word. But before he delivers his perfect two-word summary, he mentions *Interview with the Vampire*—how everyone was up in arms about the choice of Tom Cruise to play Lestat. Even novelist Anne Rice was against it, he reminds me. But once people saw Cruise in action, the tide turned. Fans loved it.

“I think the same kind of thing is going to happen here,” he says, “where at first everybody was like, ‘This is insane, this isn’t gonna work at all.’ But once they start playing it—once they start seeing some of the combat—that Flash looks like a *Mortal Kombat* character, he’s fighting very quickly…” He trails off for second, choosing the exact right words. “It works. I never would’ve thought Flash could look that cool fighting, but he does. This actually works.”

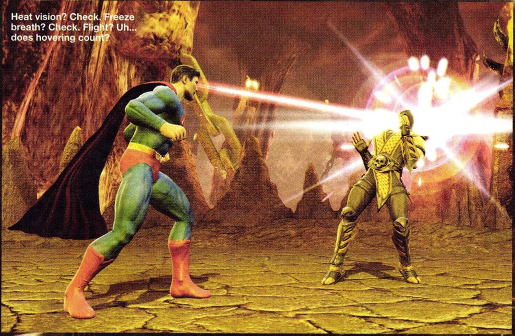
It’s a sentiment that’d been echoed throughout the day by various other *MK* team members—as is to be expected. When the title was first announced, the fanboy backlash was swift and furious. A certain vocal minority just couldn’t wrap their collective heads around how this game would come together, and they spewed their bilious confusion in bitter postings on message boards across the Internet. So the team should be forgiven for feeling a bit defensive right now.

The thing is, they’re not. In fact, they’re excited, energized, and enthusiastic. They genuinely believe this works—they’re even confident all those doubters will come around, too. That’s why they called me here for an exclusive look behind the scenes of this massive project. That’s why I was given a special sneak peek at the game’s backgrounds and character models. That’s why they actually put a PS3 controller into my hands, stepped back, and let me play the game.

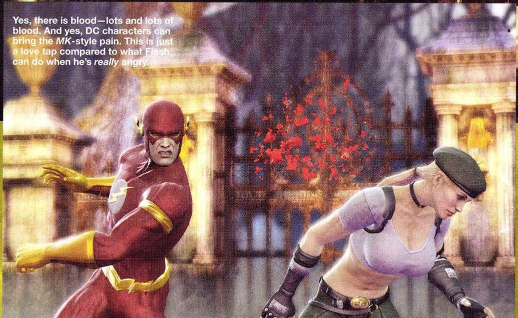
A few minutes later, as I sat in the cab to the airport reflecting on my day, I couldn’t help but think to myself: “He’s right. My God, this actually…works!”



Batman vs. Scorpion: Who's tougher? "That's the greatest part of a crossover—it really sets the imagination on fire," says DC writer Jimmy Palmiotti, who's helping with the game's script.



Heat vision? Check. Freeze breath? Check. Flight? Uh... does hovering count?



Yes, there is blood—lots and lots of blood. And yes, DC characters can bring the *MK*-style pain. This is just a love tap compared to what Flash can do when he's *really* angry.

Unreal Characters —

I'M LOOKING AT A SMALL PIECE OF BLUE CLOTH, WATCHING IT GENTLY FLAP AROUND. It's a small detail, almost insignificant, and it certainly isn't something I had expected to linger on during a demonstration of *MKvDCU's* graphical prowess. But then again, this particular piece of cloth is attached (barely) to a costume that's been shredded in nasty brawl—and it's not the only bloodstained detail on Superman's costume.

"We're giving cloth properties to all the shreds, just to give it some life," Beran says. "We have a ridiculous budget for our characters. We have 20,000 polygons per character, which is three times the last game."

"When you reach this level, all of a sudden we're defining material properties of the surfaces," Boon chimes in. He then points to the monitor: "That's leather, that's satin, that's metallic, that's skin—they actually have different light-reflecting properties. You can zoom into the fabric and see every nuance."

Superman seems invulnerable when you see him in his "pristine" condition. But a few rounds with Sub-Zero and you'll soon have a bloody, battered Kryptonian.

» ED BOON IS WAVING HIS ARMS IN A BROAD, SWEEPING MOTION.

The gesture sticks with me because on this particular day, Boon has been eerily subdued for the most part. Just to be clear: Boon is calm not in a disturbing way, but in an I've-exorcised-all-my-demons-because-I've-spent-15-years-making-one-of-the-most-gratuitously-violent-games-ever-so-now-I'm-a-remarkably-well-balanced-person kinda way. (Take that, Jack Thompson.)

This won't be the first time Boon waves his arms around today. Later, when he demonstrates the gameplay, Boon becomes almost as animated as one of the characters from the franchise he created. But for now, *Mortal Kombat's* co-creator and creative director is talking about the game's backgrounds—usually not a topic to get all that passionate about. But this is something special, and he wants me to know it.

"The backgrounds are built by a sea of people, from all the way down this hallway to all the way down another hallway," he exclaims while pointing every which way. "Plus outsourcing—it's a massive effort."

Fair enough, but raw manpower doesn't always equal success. Think you're doing something amazing? Prove it.

That's when Boon pulls up the Ruined Metropolis setting. As I stare agape at an HD monitor showing a fully optimized level, I hear all the usual "in development" phrases—words like "textures" and "nuances" and "really trying to push what people are seeing." Yet I'm having a tough time paying attention because I'm busy taking mental notes on all the little details: broken glass, baby cracks on the wall, newspaper kiosks with legible print on the old gray ladies within. The giant Daily Planet globe lies dejectedly on the ground. Smoke billows from burning cars. Dynamic lighting suffuses the environment. And I'm not the only one mesmerized; a fellow journalist sitting next to me involuntarily mutters "unbelievable." I can't help but agree.

But that's nothing compared to what I'm about to witness.

Comic fans have seen a battered Superman before. The Man of Steel isn't completely invulnerable—and although full-scale, bloody beatdowns are rare, they've still happened now and again throughout the history of Big Blue's adventures.

But this is something very different. Superman's cape is in tatters. He sports a black eye—and not the kind of shiner you'd see in the Sunday funnies section. This is an ugly gaping wound, a nasty gash a boxer would sport after a particularly brutal thrashing. And that's not all; Superman's face is bruised, his chest is scratched, his legs are slashed and bleeding. At least his knuckles are bloody as well; we can only hope the Last Son of Krypton was able to give as good as he got.

So, really…DC is allowing this to happen?

I'm quickly told that this particular level of damage hasn't yet been given final approval by DC, but the *MK* team expects most, if not all, of this to go through just fine. "It's surprising how much freedom they've given us," notes Steve Beran, the franchise's longtime art director. "There are certain rules we need to respect, and that's understandable because the same thing would be true if DC were making an *MK* comic book. But they're pretty lenient." One such rule: DC characters need to remain "heroic," no matter the level of damage; that means no silly effects like missing teeth—and, in the case of Superman, you can't mess up his hair. Seriously. (For the record, not a spit curl was out of place.) That said, DC has gone so far as to allow their heroes' emblems to be ripped from their bodies—a concession that was just approved the day before our visit. "We're going to push this as far as it can go," Beran promises.

This wasn't the first time the team talked about pushing the limits—and it wouldn't be the last. Whether it was pushing the boundaries of DC's comfort zone, pushing the very edge of this game's intended T-rating, or pushing the limits of the PS3's capabilities, *Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe* aims to push beyond anything you'd expect from an *MK* game.

This level of detail comes courtesy of *MK's* choice of game engine—but Boon is quick to explain that his team didn't just take some third-party middleware and stop there. "This is running on the *Unreal* engine, but it is a very highly modified *Unreal* engine," he says. "We're obviously not a first-person shooter. We're big characters, 20-thousand-plus polys, two big guys fighting in an arena. So there were customization things we did to specifically focus a lot of the processing and GPU power on the characters."

The details practically pop out on the game's two newly revealed characters: Flash and Sonya Blade. We begin with DC's resident speedster. What could easily be a monochromatic costume jumps out from the HD screen with an abundance of subtle nuances, including bumps and ripples in the rubbery-looking fabric, metallic bolts that reflect the light, deep treads on his boots. The same goes for Sonya, whose dog tags just happen to be hanging from her waist—a perfect excuse for us to zoom in where we don't belong. What we see when we get there is actual lettering on the tags, along with the stitching in the fabric that makes up her costume. Indeed, from head to toe, Sonya is loaded with realistic details, from the leather in her gloves to the buckles on her boots.

Though the final headcount hasn't been revealed, Boon confirms the roster is likely to come in at around 20 total (10 on each side). For the most part, the selection process was fairly straightforward: Popularity was the primary factor. "We're not introducing any new *Mortal Kombat* characters into this and we're not making up any DC characters," Boon adds.

Soon after the preliminary lists were drawn up, the team began to notice parallels between *MK* and DC characters. For example, "Batman is the dark, brooding guy from DC, and we have our Sub-Zero," Boon notes. In order to finalize the selection process, the team focused on making sure every character had a counterpart in both mood and moves, thus making for historic matches in the story mode.

Everyone is extremely tight-lipped about the remaining roster, not wanting to ruin the surprises they have planned. So far, we know about Batman and Sub-Zero, Superman and Scorpion, Flash and Sonya. Beyond that, it's all speculation.

As for the look of the characters, the team turned to the past for inspiration. "*MKII* is obviously the player favorite *MK* game," Beran says, "so we wanted to start from *MKII* design and just add details on top of that." The DC characters were a bit trickier to pull off—especially since they had to look like they belonged in the same arena as the MK crew. "Originally we were shooting for the Alex Ross [comic book art] designs as the bar, but we ended up trying to beef them up more—more of a Jim Lee kind of style," Beran says. "It lent itself proportionately more to the *MK* side, where there are really cut guys with those V-shaped proportions."

Pull off the right moves in close combat and you can actually rip Sub-Zero's mask from his face. The mask will then stay off for the rest of the fight.

›› ED BOON IS DOING IT AGAIN—WAVING HIS ARMS AROUND IN AN UNCHARACTERISTICALLY WILD GESTURE. "You can tackle your opponent and be charging through them," he begins, "and you go *Boom! Boom!* through all the different rooms in the building, and then you come tumbling out of this side there."

Boon is talking about one of the new modes of gameplay: transitions (or freefalls, as they're also known). Along with close-combat and the core fighting mechanic, these three elements comprise an all-new style of *MK* gameplay that's…oddly reminiscent of *Mortal Kombat II, the* venerated classic.

But I'm interrupting. Boon continues: "The basic gameplay is reliant on super moves, outrageous movements. You can grab someone and throw them; they go crashing through one side, come out the other; it's just complete destruction, total destruction—over-the-top."

I'm a few minutes away from actually playing the game, and frankly I'm getting a bit antsy. I've seen two of the MK team members duking it out as Superman and Sub-Zero, followed by some epic brawling between Flash and Scorpion. Someone notices my twitchy fingers, and I think I hear him whisper something about finally letting me play. But before I'm handed the controller for our exclusive hands-on, Boon has another point to make.

"We're resetting everything," he begins. "We're not saying, 'Oh, we had the fighting styles from before so we have to have them this time.' We're challenging every single aspect of the gameplay. If there's anything we didn't like, we're going to fix it or get rid of it. If there's anything we wanted to try that we haven't before, we're putting it in."

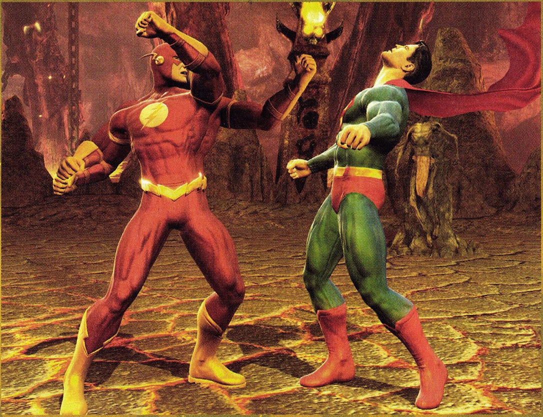
How it feels

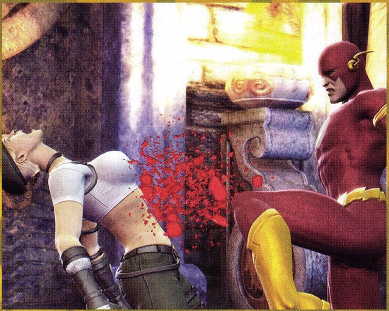
BASIC BRAWLING

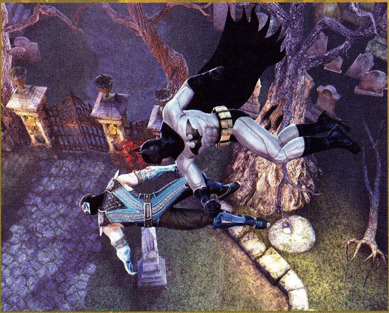
DOWN-BACK-SQUARE. BACK-FORWARD-TRIANGLE. TRIANGLE, FOLLOWED BY DOWN-FORWARD-CIRCLE. Anyone who's played any *Mortal Kombat* game should be instantly familiar with these kinds of moves. But here's where it gets interesting: I'm describing a series of super moves and combos that I pulled off as Flash. With a dash move, a teleport, and a flurry punch, along with the standard kicks and jabs, I'm whipsawing around Scorpion, nailing him in a juggle-punch sequence, keeping him off balance as I zip around the aptly named Hell level. A moment later, I switch controllers with my sparring partner and I'm delighted to find that a quick tap of back-back-Square launches Scorpion's familiar spear. "Try doing Circle and then down-away-X before your kick even hits," Boon whispers into my ear. Nice! Flash doesn't even see what hits him. "You can change moves like that in the middle of a combo," Boon smiles.

Bloody, brutal, quick and fun, the standard combat is a lot like *Mortal Kombat II*—or at least my memories of it. (Certainly, the polish is much greater.) I'm reminded again and again as I play about how the team has reduced the "canned combo sequences," allowing me to custom create my combos on the fly. I can see it in action, as I button-mash my way into some sick sequences, then try to recreate some of the better moves I managed to pull off.

One thing's for sure: This is more of a 2D gameplay experience, despite the fully 3D characters and arenas. I'm primarily moving back and forth, setting up combos, pulling off spectacular special moves. It's the kind of fisticuffs that could delight casual brawlers who don't want to get bogged down in intricate reversals, counters, and parries. (It's also almost as fun to watch as to play.) But don't worry, all you hardcore fighters—you should be pleased with the super versions of the special moves, which require precision and timing. One example: Superman's ground pound. Anyone can pull it off once, but only a skilled gamer will be able to nail the right command sequence to pull it off twice in a row.







CLOSE-IN COMBAT

TAP R1 AT THE RIGHT TIME AND YOU'LL PULL YOUR FOE IN FOR A THROW. But that's just the beginning. Instead of watching a scripted sequence, you'll enter into a new gameplay mode, complete with offensive and defensive moves. Nail each hit, and you'll inflict a severe amount of physical damage (and mental—it's rough to see your character getting such a brutal pummeling). That said, your foe can break free from the close-in combat with the right counter, thus ending the mode.

During my playtest, the close-in mode was set to five hits total, although I'm told this isn't final. ("We want to interrupt the fight but we don't want it to be the whole fighting experience," Boon explains.) Nail each hit and you do the max damage, ending the sequence. Miss or be countered at any time during the sequence, and the close-in combat is over. Playing as Scorpion, I had a grand time with a few nasty wallops along with an open-handed uppercut to the elbow, cracking Flash's bones in an utterly delightful way.

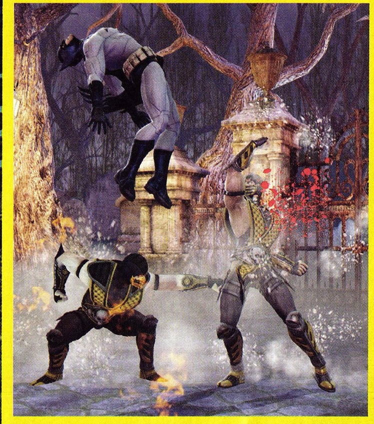
FREEFALL FIGHTING

TRANSITIONAL SEQUENCES HAVE BEEN A PART OF FIGHTING GAMES FOR A WHILE NOW, but for the most part they've been passive experiences: knock your foe through a window, then watch as you both fall to the street below. This time around the sequence will be fully interactive. It plays out like close-in combat, with a similar set of moves. The difference? If the defender counters, the positions are reversed and he goes on the offensive. The switcheroo can happen as many times as possible in the roughly nine seconds you'll be in this mode. Once you're back on the ground, you'll both return to standard combat.

Some levels will have a limited number of transitional areas. Others, like Hell (the one we were playing on), have unlimited cascading levels, adding a layer of complexity to the combat. At this stage in the development, I didn't find it quite as immediately satisfying as the close-in combat, but it does add an additional layer of strategy and complexity to the combat.

FINISH HIM!

Fans have already despaired over the lack of fatalities in the game, but we've learned the game will definitely include some form of finishing moves. "I don't think people will be disappointed," Beran smiles. "We can't rip heads off, but we're trying to push the 'Teen' rating as much as possible, and they definitely are brutal."



Worried about *Mortal Kombat* losing it's dark tone by squaring off against DC characters? Well, have you read any DC comics lately? He's not called the Dark Knight for nothing...

Untold Story

But wait! We've gone this far and haven't yet talked about the story? Well, that's because the *MK* team is being exceedingly coy about sharing any details. Here's what we know: A cataclysmic event causes two separate dimensions to merge, setting the stage for a series of epic battles between the DC heroes and *MK* brawlers. The fate of the universe hangs in the balance. And that's about it.

OK, we did manage to wrest a few more details out of the team, despite their greatest efforts to keep the plotline shrouded in mystery. Here's what we gleaned:

» The story itself was created and written by Vogel and his *MK* gang, not by a team of DC writers, as had been earlier reported. DC scribes Jimmy Palmiotti and Justin Gray were brought in to vet the story, adjust the DC action, and rewrite all the DC dialogue. They left the *MK* dialogue alone, thus ensuring both sides sound authentic.

» The cause of this "cataclysmic event" might eventually spur both sides to unite against a common enemy. "There's a greater evil involved that sort of melds the worlds together," Palmiotti says. When pressed for more details, the DC writer offered up this tantalizing tidbit: "Let's just say, something happens on both sides that causes an even bigger problem, and the reaction to this is going to be the arena setup where these characters can finally meet and not only fight each other, but fight a common enemy."

» Magic is a key factor among *MK* characters. Superman's weakness is magic. Hence, Superman is vulnerable in fights with *MK* characters.

» The lack of fatalities will be addressed in the storyline somehow.

» You can play through the story mode from either side. When playing from the DC side, the heroes will behave like heroes. "They're not hostile to anybody initially," Vogel says. "We have to be careful how we instigate fights. That's one of the rules DC placed upon us. *MK* characters on the other hand can say, 'Get off my lawn or I'll beat your ass.' That's not a problem."

» While we have absolutely no confirmation on this one, we're pretty sure there'll be some villains in the DC roster. Why? Because we overheard someone on the *MK* team mumbling something cryptic about some unknown DC characters wanting something from *MK* characters. Hrm... hard to picture someone like Batman or Supes wanting anything from Goro. Joker, on the other hand... ■

GamesRadar.com Top 7...

Bad guys you didn't want to kill

The gaming murders that left a bad taste in our mouths

The Colossi

Shadow of the Colossus

Most of these huge beasts are just minding their own business and only attack once provoked. Colossus 13 doesn't even retaliate, instead merely attempting to shake you off. They clearly feel pain too - stab them in the head and you'll know about it. Come on, one of them's even got a cool beard, yet you still killed it, didn't you? It's dead now. You did it. Shame on you.

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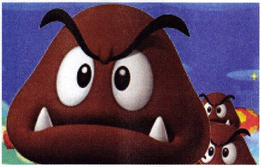


Goombas

Super Mario Bros.

If you stand still and they hit you, you die, but then that's true of buses and you don't go around stamping on them. You only get 100 points per kill too - the gaming equivalent of a $5.00 whole chicken. Has life really become so discounted?

GLaDOS

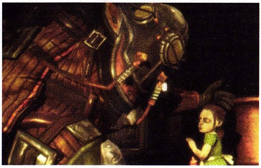
Portal

Just as hostages can come to bond with their captors, so you end up liking GLaDOS - the female-voiced computer in Portal, the Best Game Ever Made (TM). Guilt for killing her is prolonged because you have to do it a piece at a time. While she talks to you. (Sniff.)

Orbinaut

Sonic the Hedgehog

After these critters toss their spikes they're just cute, marshmallowy-looking creatures that just stare and slowly move forwards. They're now totally harmless. Are you really such a bastard that you'd kill them? Yep, us too. But we felt dirty afterwards.



Big Daddies

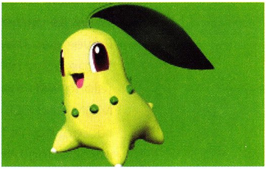
BioShock

They're huge, ugly, armed with a massive drill and turn violent with only the smallest provocation, but the Big Daddies still make us sad when they die. They're only protecting their Little Sister after all. 'Wake up, Mr Bubbles?' Sorry, ain't gonna happen.

Spotty Bulorb

Pikmin

This is the angry mob lynching of gaming, The Spotty Bulorb is surrounded in its sleep, worn down and then killed. While its children watch! Or maybe you killed them first? OK, so it's just like nature. But nature can be so cruel.



Level 1

Pokemon

You've been playing for ages and you run into a low-level Pokemon. That's when you realise your super-powered team of fighters has become a remorseless unit. What chance does a level 2 Pidgey have against your level 67 Glaceon?

QUANTUM OF SOLACE

PS3 • Release Date: November 2008 • Publisher: Activision • Developer: Treyarch

LEAPS AND BONDS

By Chris Hudak

Another rebooted franchise, another James Bond film, another leap-of-faith chance to get a movie-license game right. In fact, the latest turn is a Bond game designed to deliver on the promise of a rejuvenated franchise, capturing and capitalizing on elements from the Daniel Craig movie we've already seen *(Casino Royale),* while introducing scenes from the latest upcoming flick that lends its name to the new game. Developer Treyarch got access to the edgy new badass Bond (along with the movie people at MGM and EON Productions), recreating his likeness, and introducing him to their work (which the team reported he would have gladly continued playing in its unfinished state in his set-trailer between takes if he'd had his way.)

Garrett Young, Executive Producer: "The cool thing is, we get to show [the filmmakers] the game, of course—Barbara Broccoli and Michael Wilson, who have been this family of producers for the movies forever. We got to show Daniel Craig the game, and his first reaction was 'Okay, let me play, let me play!' He's very much a gamer—a bit of a child of the gamer generation. He loved the game when he sat down to play it, and he was even saying [about some of the images in the game's front end] 'Hold on guys, I think we have a better picture of this!'—you know, talking to the producer assistant people—'We need another, better image for this!' He's a passionate gamer—he knows it's running on the *Call of Duty 4* engine—and he's excited to see himself; he's never been in a game before!"

According to Assistant Art Director Dan Moditch access to the cast and crew was made available surprisingly early in the process, with the intention of helping the team craft faithful recreations of the notable scenes: "We can come to the filmmakers with anything we need, generally, and they're available to answer our questions—we get their scripts ahead of time, and that's how we write our scripts." The same holds true for access to the Pinewood Studios movie sets that has resulted in realistic in-game takes of *Casino Royale's* ostentatious casino/hotel, and the sprawling construction site that was the setting for the movie's intense, teeth-gritting parkour foot-chase sequence (and yes, that's in the game, too).

Quantum of huh?

Just for clarification, the title *Quantum of Solace* is purely lifted here, and has precisely double-oh-zilch to do with the namesake short story Ian Fleming published in 1959—good thing too, since it was in fact a non-spy, zero-action, W. Somerset Maugham kind of deal that strictly relegated Bond to an audience role.

LICENSE TO KILL

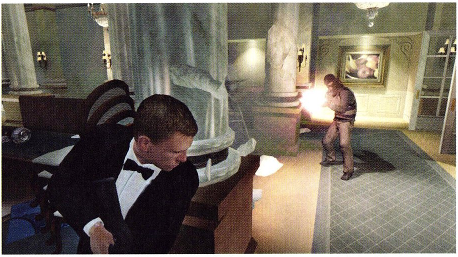
Somewhere along the line, the characters (and eventually, the entire licensed world) of James Bond started to veer away from Ian Fleming's vision, and get pretty…well, silly: The endless, facile, all-but-wink-at-the-camera one-liners, the goofy gadgets, the unlikely bimbos, and the increasingly-preposterous cars. As with the newest round of Bond films, the *Quantum of Solace* game definitely jams a stopper on that happy-crappy. The on-screen action focuses on more straight-up combat and/or stealth through James Bond's eyes in environments filled with unscripted enemies, rich dynamic lighting and audio, tons of destructible cover, and the occasional unexpected intrusion of uber-cinematic "Bond Moments."

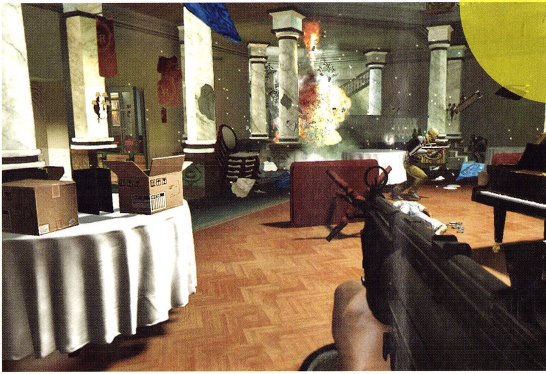
One of the perennial arguments when it comes to character-based, movie-licensed action games is the old first-person/third-person rift: Do you want to experience the adventure as the hero, or see him onscreen, busting his own bad moves? Even after all these years (and platforms), it's basically impossible to argue with the success and appeal of the original *GoldenEye* game (on Nintendo 64), so the designers certainly wanted to keep the first-person approach…but some action elements simply work better (certainly more cinematically) in third-person. James Bond himself has something of a conflicted personality anyway, and in some sense, so does *Quantum of Solace*. Most of the action is through Your Eyes Only…but the game also features a variety of third-person surprises to keep the sense of playing a Bond movie intact.

The classic Bond score ramps up and down through the action, from subtle, tension-building drum-riff to full-on orchestral blare.

DO YOU WANT TO EXPERIENCE THE ADVENTURE AS THE HERO, OR SEE HIM ONSCREEN, BUSTING HIS OWN BAD MOVES?

Quantum of Solace seamlessly shifts between third-person views (to show off Bond's steely-eyed mug and classy duds) and first-person mayhem.





'I got your Golden Gun right *here.*' Another classy hotel ballroom shot to hell, Bond-style. Don't get too comfy behind all that destructible cover.

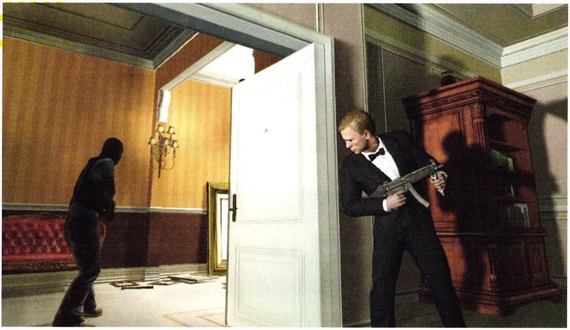
NO ONE ELSE HERE WILL SAVE YOU

Our introduction to *Quantum of Solace* found us in the quiet, carpeted corridors of a posh hotel—a game section expanded from the sequence in *Casino Royale* (where Bond leaves the casino-floor card table to check on what's happening upstairs): We were moving down the hall through Bond's eyes, of course, but when we spied a gun-toting goon waiting ahead, a quick crouch behind the cover of a room-service tray zoomed the camera out to bring Daniel Craig's character-model into view. Somewhere down the corridor, an ice machine clunked—throwing into sharp relief just how suspiciously, dangerously quiet this particular stretch of hotel hallway really was.

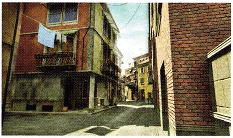
Now we have a number of options: continue to sneak and skulk, ducking behind maid-carts, perhaps taking the occasional side-trip through a vending-machine alcove or whatnot; quietly approach the unsuspecting goon from behind and execute a quick third-person stealth-kill by abruptly disconnecting the base of his skull from his spine; or just rush forward with (silenced) guns blazing. One guess which approach makes the more impressive game-demo. *Pthwwp!*

Upon clambering into a ventilation shaft to enter a new area undetected, we got our first cold-water dose of reality: Bullets go through things—in this case, the very airshaft we were in was suddenly *ptink! ptink! ptink!* riddled with holes from an incidental gun-battle that was happening in a room below. We bailed out of said

MOST OF THE ACTION IS THROUGH YOUR EYES ONLY...BUT THE GAME ALSO FEATURES A VARIETY OF THIRD-PERSON SURPRISES TO KEEP THE SENSE OF PLAYING A BOND MOVIE INTACT.



TOP: Filling the local airspace with bullets is fun... but sometimes it behooves you to skulk around and hit the enemy when he ain't lookin'.
BELOW: *Quantum of Solace* features indoor and outdoor envrions from both Daniel Craig Bond films that are meticulously rendered.



shaft and got quickly embroiled in a hectic close-quarters gunfight in a very nice hotel suite which was, alas, quickly reduced to ruin—glass and polished-teak furnishings shot to shards and splinters, punctured couch-pillows gouting feathers, lamps blasted to smithereens off tables, and entire doors blown out of their frames as the ordnance got heavier and heavier. Cover in *Quantum of Solace,* be it the alabaster statuary in a sauna or the metallic barriers of some boiler-room catwalk, is an ephemeral ally, to be utilized but not relied upon.

Another *Casino Royale* environment brought to navigable life—and one that illustrates the game's overall attempt to balance first-person action and cinematic flair—is the construction site, home of that stunning parkour foot-chase. A traditional first-person pursuit through such a labyrinthine, industrial pile-up is a daunting prospect, but you're kept aware of your quarry's movements by a camera-in-camera view of where your target currently is, and what he's doing. For one particularly harrowing moment where you must race up the incline of a massive crane, the viewpoint seamlessly moves out to a third-person view of Bond teetering along the ridge, complete with a real-time balance meter (and the inevitable jump down to the next metallic platform looks like it hurts every bit as much as the one in the movie did. Ouch.)

The Treyarch designers handled, loaded, and fired the real-world examples of all the weapons in the game, just for you.

Other examples of such "cinematic intrusion" include segments where you skulk along a high window ledge at the hotel; as he nears windows of rooms populated by potential threats, a second view from inside the room in question gives you an idea of what the enemy can see... and reinforces the sense of watching a tense sequence in a movie. And speaking of tense, we saw at least one instance where you need to hack an electronic door-lock via a mini-game interface—but the kicker is, it's in real time, and while you're working away at it, you must also keep half an eye on a small camera (from the point of view of said lock), looking back at your own face...and possibly, the enemies that are sneaking up behind you…

A VIEW TO A KILL

Daniel Craig not only lends his image to *Quantum of Solace,* but also extensive voiceover work—at the time of this writing, it has not been announced which, if any, of the other film actors will contribute voice work (although at least one of the "Bond Girls" seems like a good bet). And of course, the obligatory Bond music weaves its way into the audio mix at crucial moments, but it's often subtle—for example, rhythmic drum-riffs that suggest, rather than blare, the famous James Bond music theme (they save that kind of stuff for when you blow out a massive million-dollar chandelier/ceiling that crashes down on 10 bad guys at once, or when you otherwise take explosives to something particularly expensive).

Thankfully, Treyarch seems to be sweating even the little details—we even talked to a team of animators that was focusing on creating natural, fluid movements for enemies who react in a startled manner, or must slide to a stop if they've been running. They even went to the trouble to get the Walther license for this one—since you're gonna spend a good chunk of the game looking at the handgrip end of a P99 anyway, the reasoning seems to be that you might as well be looking at the real thing. Treyarch even brought their animators out to the gun range to handle, load and fire the real things...all for "research" purposes, of course. T'yah, and motion-capturing the Bond Girls must be a real selfless ordeal, too.

So: License to kill, or license to ill? What we've seen thus far are several distinct, promising aspects of gameplay. What we haven't yet seen is precisely how they're stitched together into a flowing game (multiplayer is also an Eyes Only secret, as of this writing). *Quantum of Solace* is slated to hit in November—easy to remember, since it's the when the movie is coming out, too. Monitor this frequency for full intel. ■

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Reviews

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RATINGS

★★★★★ **EXCEPTIONAL**
An excellent game that takes its genre to new heights.

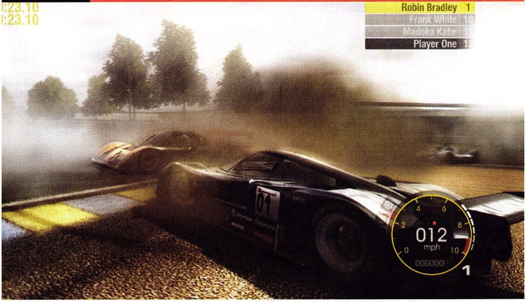
★★★★ **GREAT**
Not flawless, but a truly great game and among the best in its genre.

★★★ **OKAY**
An overall positive experience for fans of the genre or subject matter.

★★ **POOR**
Suffers from several major flaws that really damage the experience.

★ **AWFUL**
Not worth your time or money.

GAME of the month GRID p 64



Meet the experts delivering your buying advice

Bond... Bourne... Clank?! These days, *anybody* can be a secret agent—including the PTOM crew.

ROB SMITH
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

AGENT ARCHETYPE: Bond. James Bond.
CODENAME: Long Trouser
PREFERRED WEAPON: Dry Witticisms
PROFILE: Once a high-level double-oh agent in Her Majesty's Secret Service, Rob angerly resigned when budget cuts forced the cancellation of his Aston Martin lease. He is now merely licensed to...drive by the state of California.

NOW PLAYING: *Haze* (sadly), *Battlefield: Bad Company, GTA IV, MLB 08: The Show*

TERESA DUN
ASSISTANT EDITOR

AGENT ARCHETYPE: Cate Archer
CODENAME: Obscure Referencer
PREFERRED WEAPON: Robotic Poodles
PROFILE: A quiet, but effective operative, Teresa possesses enormous mental fortitude. She's the only known agent able to destroy a foe with a withering glance alone. She is also able to hack any computer network with a PSP Slim.

NOW PLAYING: *Elefunk, Overlord: Raising Hell, Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds, GTA IV*

KEN BOUSQUET
ART DIRECTOR

AGENT ARCHETYPE: Jack Bauer
CODENAME: Time Bomb
PREFERRED WEAPON: The Withering Glare
PROFILE: Ken is one of our most creative and productive agents, but repeated mandates to complete mission objectives in 24 hours have taken their toll. An extended sabatical at "Soccer Camp"is recommended to defuse the potentially volatile situation.

NOW PLAYING: Outdoor men's soccer, darts

GARY STEINMAN
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

AGENT ARCHETYPE: <Classified>
CODENAME: <Even more classified>
PREFERRED WEAPON: Bionic Pinky
PROFILE: Why a bionic pinky? Because this deep-cover agent has been known to claim that he's got "more power in my little finger than in your entire body." We're not quite sure if that's a challenge or a proposition...

NOW PLAYING: *Space Invaders Extreme, Crisis Core, MGS4*

ROGER BURCHILL
MANAGING EDITOR

AGENT ARCHETYPE: Maxwell Smart
CODENAME: Swinger
PREFERRED WEAPON: The Nude Bomb
PROFILE: Once a top field agent, Roger disappeared from intelligence circles for a number of years. He has recently resurfaced, but frequently rails against the tyranny of clothes. HR has been notified.

NOW PLAYING: *GRID*, and more *GRID*

MIKEL REPARAZ
EDITOR, GAMESRADAR

AGENT ARCHETYPE: Nathan Hunt
CODENAME: Chameleon
PREFERRED WEAPON: The Bag of Anonymity
PROFILE: A top graduate of the IMF training program, Mikel is a master of disguise. Despite a long and illustrious career, his true visage has never been photographed. His ability to elude trailing agents in grocery stores is legendary.

NOW PLAYING: *GTA IV* and very little else

Retro View

The big games we were playing this month in PlayStation history.

ONE YEAR AGO...

Ninja Gaiden Sigma (PS3)
(9.0 out of 10)

The Darkness (PS3)
(9.0 out of 10)

Tomb Raider: Anniversary (PS2)
(8.5 out of 10)

FIVE YEARS AGO...

Downhill Damnation (PS2)
(9 out of 10)

Ape Escape 2 (PS2)
(8 out of 10)

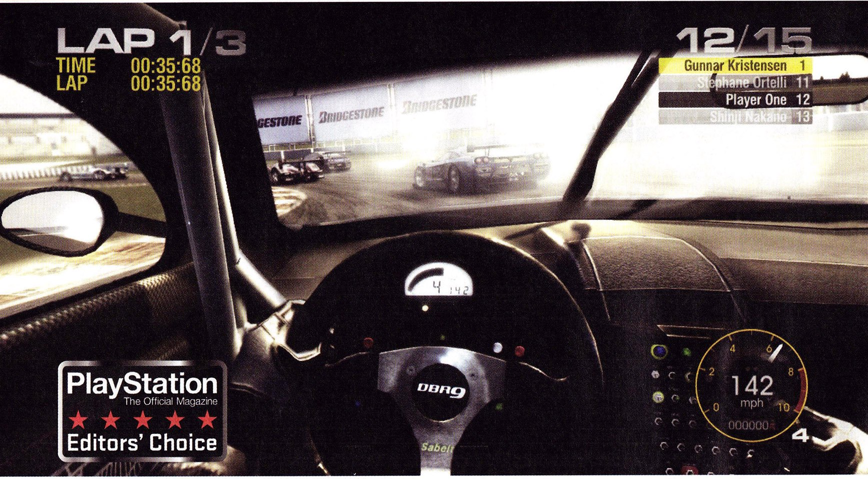
Silent Line – Armored Core (PS2)
(8 out of 10)

10 YEARS AGO...

Circuit Breakers (PS1)
(4 stars)

Kartia (PS1)
(4 stars)

Turbo Prop Racing (PS1)
(4 stars)



GRID's racing action is raw, aggressive, and intense—traits that will quickly be assimilated into your driving style.

PS3 | R

GRID

Strap on your helmet and buckle your safety harness; the rookie's heating up the track

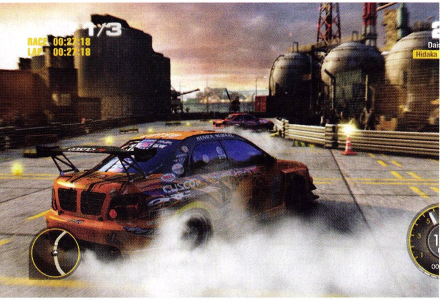
PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: Codemasters

There's a Challenge race that occurs periodically in *GRID* where you can pick up big bucks and reputation points by defeating your fiercest rival. One race for all the marbles, if you will. Thanks to a confluence of timing and subject matter it's very similar to the showdown that now confronts the *GRID* and *Gran Turismo 5 Prologue* games. The smart money might be on the polished veteran—"The Franchise" —but never underestimate a hungry young rookie as all bets are off when the green flag drops.

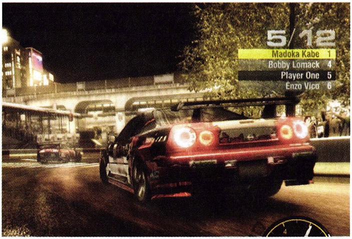
First and foremost, any racing game facing off against *GT5 Prologue* has to contend with its awe-inspiring 1080p 60 fps graphics. While *GRID* can't equal the photorealism of *Prologue's* visuals, it compensates quite nicely at half the frame rate and with a cinematic style that lets you "feel" the race instead of just viewing it. Dramatic camera angles, atmospheric lighting, and environmental effects all combine to imbue *GRID* with a gritty, urban ambiance that befits its intense and aggressive gameplay. There's still plenty of "wow factor" in *GRID's* eye candy, it's just a different brand of sweetness than *Gran Turismo's.* More importantly, any technical performance "shortcoming"—be it perceived or real—never inhibits the actual racing experience.

Where *GRID* ups the visual ante is in the area of damage deformation. *GRID* goes beyond simply exhibiting damage on car models; crash sequences are cinematic feasts as cars can flip and become airborne while scattering all manner of vehicle and environmental debris—this is one game where the replay mode is certain to get a work out. But the fact that a detached bumper may still be sitting in the middle of the track on a subsequent lap isn't merely "cool," it also adds a layer of unpredictability and an enhanced reactive dimension to the gameplay.

In my review of *Gran Turismo 5 Prologue* in the June issue, I waxed poetic about the game's sublime



As a racing purist, drift racing's disdain of traction always struck me as absurd. After pulling off a one million-plus point combo drift while passing three cars in the process, I am officially a fan.



Replay Flashbacks allow you to "rewind" races that you'd otherwise lose. Is it cheating or a godsend?

The 24 Hours of Le Mans is a featured event in *GRID*. I still curse the AI car that spun me into the wall as I led the game's 24-minute version with 10 seconds left in the race.

control mechanics, balanced learning curve, and the its uncanny ability to convey a realistic driving experience. The *Gran Turismo* franchise prides itself on its adherence to simulation with the result being an unparalleled level of satisfaction once you've mastered the demanding (although sometimes monotonous) regimen of absorbing car handling dynamics and track layouts.

But whereas *Prologue* gradually integrates you into the game with its learning curve, *GRID* has you attacking the apex from the get go. Pick any race, event, or driving category at anytime in *GRID* and you'll be engulfed in the heat of competition. Rookie or Pro, there's hardly a moment in the game where you aren't furiously battling your way through the field or desperately fighting off attempts to assume the lead. Since you're more frequently switching cars and race styles, the learning curve does feel a little unbalanced and it does take longer to become assimilated to the control mechanics, but hang in there and you'll be driving like a champ in no time. The overall experience is decidedly more arcade-like than simulation, but one that still requires you to develop a high level of control mastery to ensure success.

But perhaps *GRID's* strong suit is the variety of race experiences it offers. Each of the three major regions in the game focuses on particular cars and race styles: muscle cars and street courses in the U.S., Touring, GT, and Prototype cars on road-style courses in Europe, and tuner-type cars and drift racing in Japan. The game's comprehensive Grid World career mode ensures that you'll be exploring the unique challenges of each region, car-type, and race-style in depth (drift races and the 24 *Minutes* of Le Mans proved particularly satisfying—once mastered.) Along the way, you'll need to select and manage a teammate and juggle sponsorships to keep money and reputation points flowing in. Thankfully, you never have to race events over and over again in *GRID* to save up for a particular car—just enter the next event to keep the money and new rides coming.

But ultimately, the essence of a game isn't about the number of cars, tracks, or features; it's about moments. Perhaps no moment better illustrates *GRID's* unique gameplay aura than during my pursuit of race leaders on the Washington, D.C. street course. I rounded a blind, high-speed corner and encountered a multi-vehicle pile-up; too late to brake, my car smashed into the melee, become airborne, and executed a barrel roll. Miraculously, my car cleared the pile-up, landed on all four wheels, and continued on with hardly any loss of speed. The analytical reviewer voice in me said, "Um, that's not very realistic." But the racing fanboy in me screamed, "Freakin' aye! I just barrel-rolled to take the lead!"

There are equally memorable, though differently flavored, moments in other racing games, but *GRID* seems able to conjure up these moments in practically every race. Like the powerhouse race thoroughbreds that populate it, *GRID* is an unrelenting ride that keeps rewarding you the harder you push it.

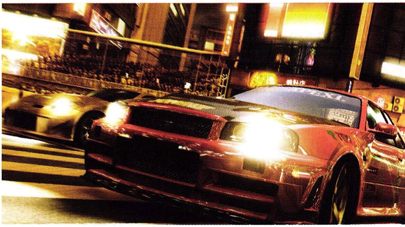
Roger Burchill

★★★★★

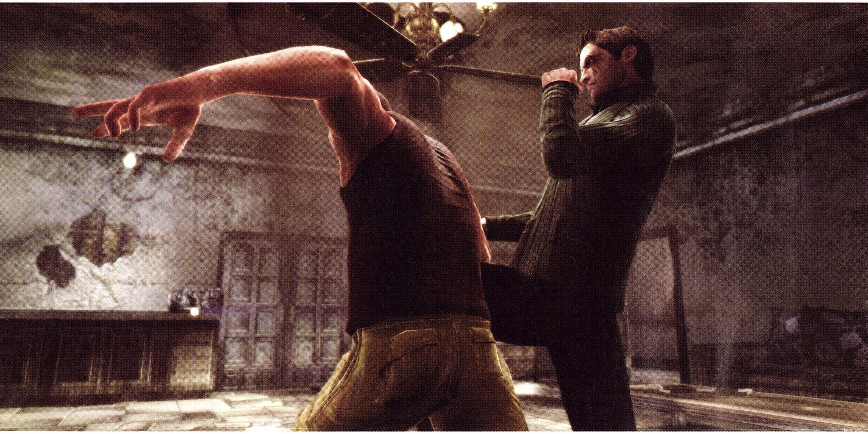
Head-to-Head

GRID	GT5 Prologue
41 cars	71 cars
14 locations with 72 track variations	6 locations with 12 track variations
51 events totaling **136 races***	40 events totaling **40 races**

* Not including Le Mans or Challenge races



I generally prefer the first-person view, but *GRID* is one of the few racing games that plays better from the third-person perspective.



Bourne's savage beatdowns are easily the best (and best-looking) part of the game. Now, if only they didn't feel so stiff…

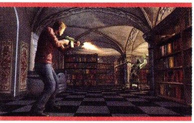
PS3 | R

Robert Ludlum's

The Bourne Conspiracy

Shoot Thug A, punch Thug B, repeat

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Sierra DEVELOPER: High Moon Studios

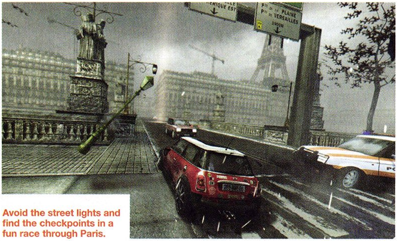


Don't be fooled by the title: *Robert Ludlum's The Bourne Conspiracy* sounds like some overarching work that ties the *Bourne* films and novels together, but it's got little to do with the former and nothing to do with the latter. In fact, it's essentially a Matt Damon-less adaptation of *The Bourne Identity*, with a few new scenarios that pad the action—but if you're okay with that, you'll get a kick out of the action. However, most of *Conspiracy* is as generic as the game's interpretation of the hero's face.

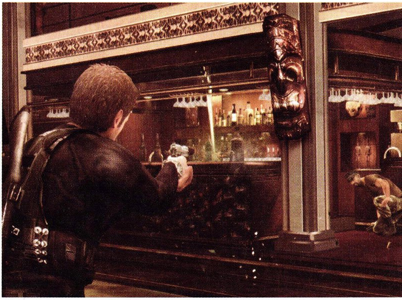
As amnesiac super-assassin Jason Bourne, you'll stumble through Jason's search for his past, shooting and punching interchangeable goon squads as you go. The action's pretty simple, and it's divided into three distinct types: cover-centric shooting, simple martial-arts brawls, and even simpler quicktime events, which never require more than a few timed button presses.

The shooting, though bare-bones, works well enough: creep along with your guns drawn, and when you encounter a few baddies, duck behind the nearest cover point and wait for an opportunity to pop up and blast them in the face. Most of the time your enemies will take cover, too, but they tend to get locked into repetitive patterns, and once they do, killing them is just a matter of timing. They also have a fatal habit of hiding behind destructible objects, like crates and cars, the latter of which can potentially blow up and kill them.

To get an extra edge on your opponents, you can use Jason's Bourne Sense (which also works as a GPS of sorts, pinpointing your next objective) to clearly identify them and draw a bead on the nearest one, although there's no blind-firing, grenades, or any fun



Avoid the street lights and find the checkpoints in a fun race through Paris.



Bourne's world is filled with destructible objects, many of which your enemies will crouch behind.

stuff like that. Instead, *Conspiracy* adds variety to its shootouts with hand-to-hand throwdowns.

If there's one thing *Conspiracy* does well, it's capturing the breakneck pace of the *Bourne* films—and nowhere is this better represented than during the one-on-one fight scenes. Sure, they're a little ridiculous—gun-toting Jason frequently gets charged by unarmed goons, at which point he has to take them on bare-handed as they attack him one at a time, like extras in a kung fu movie. (He can also rush armed enemies himself to force them into bare-knuckle face-offs, but this can be a bad idea if any nearby enemies still have their guns out.) But despite the silly premise, the action stays fast and brutal, with Bourne pummeling his enemies with a wide variety of seamless, breathtakingly no-nonsense martial-arts moves.

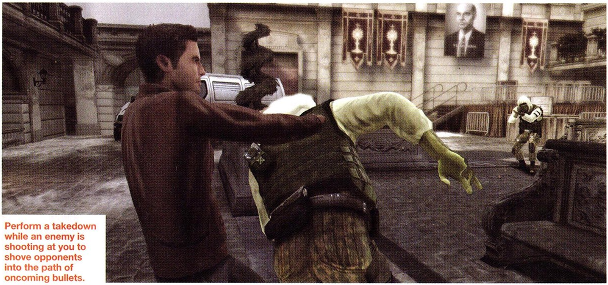
Unfortunately, the awesomeness is only skin-deep, and after a while the fights get stiff and repetitive. Usually, they boil down to using two attack buttons to chain together three-strike combos, and then holding down the block button while the enemy retaliates with a three-striker of his own. Against random thugs, this isn't really a problem, as the fights are usually over in seconds. But against bosses—particularly the last two—this ebb and flow can turn the once-exciting battles into long, dull slogs. The saving grace here is in the context-sensitive takedown moves (see sidebar), which enable Jason to dish out fantastic beatings with whatever's nearby and put weaker foes down instantly.

Add a single, mildly fun driving level—in which you'll need to elude Parisian cops in an indestructible Mini Cooper—and that's really all there is to the game. There's a story, too, obviously, but because it's riddled with flashback missions, it's about as disjointed as Bourne's shattered mind. One second you'll be sprinting through the U.S. embassy in Zurich, picking fights with Marines and dodging sniper fire. Then, something will trigger Bourne's memory, and you'll suddenly be at the University of Vilnius in Lithuania, fighting your way through another assassination flashback. It can get confusing.

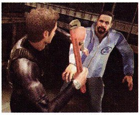
Although it's a decent game overall with a lot of fun moments and a few inventive touches, the sad fact remains that there are plenty of games on the market right now that do nearly everything *The Bourne Conspiracy* does, but better. Add a few lazy design decisions—like linear paths roped off by jumbles of impassable three-foot-tall obstacles—and Bourne barely scrapes by as a passable diversion for fans of the series.

Mikel Reparaz

★★★



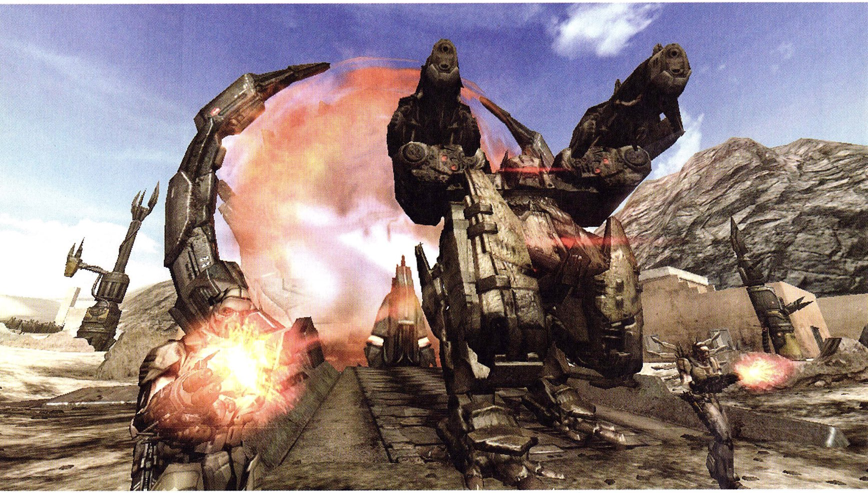
Perform a takedown while an enemy is shooting at you to shove opponents into the path of oncoming bullets.



Unleash Your Anger

If Bourne does a lot of damage in a short amount of time, he'll fill up his adrenaline gauge, a blue meter that really only serves one purpose: enabling brutal takedown moves. Fill up one of the gauge's three bars when you're in a gunfight and you'll be able to pop up and cinematically kill a nearby enemy—or more, if you've got more than one bar filled. When fighting hand-to-hand, it's even more impressive, as Bourne will start a flashy, context-sensitive martial-arts display that frequently ends with your enemy smashed headfirst into a desk or hurled down a staircase. It's usually enough to kill any lesser baddies, although bosses always need additional clobbering.

***The Bourne Conspiracy* is actually the third time** *The Bourne Identity* has been adapted to a different medium; the first time was for a TV movie in 1988.



You do not want to get in the shadow of this colossus. The Strogg Cyclops hits hard.

PS3 | R

Enemy Territory:

Quake Wars

At least none of the pain is physical

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: id Software/Splash Damage/Underground Development

In *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars,* the Strogg get a nifty jetpack-like vehicle that boosts them skyward to rain bombs on the opposition. It's a lot of fun, swooping down on the enemy and watching them scatter.

I realize that's not a terribly elegant way of starting a review. But I wanted to lead off on a positive note, and with this version of *Quake Wars*, the pickings in that department are awfully slim.

Things got off to a grim start from the moment I booted up the game. Given the lack of any sort of tutorial, introduction, or story in this multiplayer-focused shooter, I picked some random options and started up a match. Or rather, I waited through an interminable load time—perplexing given the mandatory eight-minute install process—and then started the *warm-up* round.

In a game with other human players, this pre-game free-play would allow everyone to get a feel for the map while waiting for the minimum number of players. Trouble is, I started out playing against bots, where the minimum number of players is always present. And so, in an impressive show of thoughtless design, each match in single-player mode begins with a warm-up period

The Field Ops class can call in air strikes with its targeting tools.

Looks pretty when stationary, doesn't it? Shame that it's about as smooth as a flipbook when in motion.

that lasts exactly 10 seconds. Let me be clear: You pick your game, you wait through a painful load period, you run around for 10 seconds...and then the match restarts. Every time.

I wish I could say that I'm just nitpicking, or that this is the only example of Lazy Port Syndrome found in the game, or that things get better online. But I'm not, and it's not, and they don't. From controls to interface to graphical performance to AI to communication, it's excruciatingly obvious that the famous *Doom/Quake* engine was not optimized for PS3, and the developers were hamstrung by the technology.

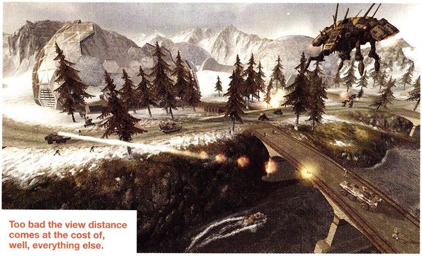
With its enormous maps, wide array of mission objectives, and varied character classes, *Quake Wars* appears at first glance to promise strategic depth. The attack-and-defend mechanic keeps matches tightly focused: One team always defends while the other attacks, pushing forward through a series of objectives to reach a final, well-protected goal. The diversity of the five different classes encourages teamwork, and the ability to upgrade and attain "proficiencies" in each of the classes offers some longer-term objectives. For example, if you earn enough experience points maintaining your team's equipment as an engineer, you'll gain access to a grenade launcher. Or if you hack enough enemy gear as the Covert Ops class, you become invisible to enemy radar. It sounds promising.

Then you actually start playing, and it quickly becomes clear that the impressive map size comes at the expense of both graphical detail and performance. It's bad enough that structures are embarrassingly simplistic, with bland, sparse spaces reminiscent of something you might find on the PS2. But it gets worse: even with these concessions, the game is a choppy, lag-ridden atrocity. In every game I jumped into online, the performance was so awful that it became virtually impossible to perform the simplest task with any accuracy—like, for example, aiming my gun. Driving vehicles was like watching a slideshow of an interesting-looking battle, and the lag between being shot and those shots actually causing me bodily harm made for a fun little "guess the shooter" side-game. The designers helpfully included a stat on the match screen to show the average ping time for human players on your team, so I'm able to report that this was happening with ping times in the low 20s. If all that sounds like gibberish to you, I'll make it simple: That's really fast. So this kind of performance is absolutely inexcusable.

If you simply cannot bear another day without the benefit of a new shooter, it might be worth keeping an eye out for a patch and the possibility of improved network performance. As of launch, though, I can't recommend *Quake Wars* to anyone but the most dedicated masochist.

Joe Rybicki

★½



Too bad the view distance comes at the cost of, well, everything else.

16 Easy Steps to Enjoying *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* Online

1. Choose "Online Play" from main menu.
2. Choose "Join Match" from online menu.
3. Select your preferred host and hit X to join the match.
4. If you receive the message "Join request rejected," repeat steps 2 and 3. If not, proceed to step 5.
5. Wait 30 to 40 seconds for map to load.
6. Wait around 10 seconds for the next deployment.
7. If you then receive the message "Disconnected from host," wait 10 to 15 seconds for online menu to load, then repeat steps 2 through 7. If not, proceed to step 8.
8. Select your team, class, and loadout from the "Limbo" menu.
9. Spawn with a parachute in midair, and spend your two seconds of drop time moving your parachute around to no significant effect.
10. Once on the ground, attempt to decipher mission objectives and acronyms being thrown at you.
11. Discover that neither map nor HUD is particularly helpful, and grab a helicopter to attempt to discern your objectives from the air.
12. Discover that the helicopter controls in a fashion counter to any other game in your experience.
13. Explode vehicle by flying straight into the ground, repeatedly.
14. Repeat steps 8 through 10 and, if desired, 11 through 14.
15. Get run over by an AI-controlled teammate.
16. Throw hands up. Wait—but don't hold breath—for patch.

In April, Activision announced they'd be closing Underground Development (formerly Z-Axis, the studio that ported the game) after *Quake Wars'* launch. That explains a lot.

Though your main quarry here is a Russian named Sadar, chasing the gold to his palace smacks of inspiration from an Iraqi dictator we all remember.

PS3 | R

Battlefield: Bad Company

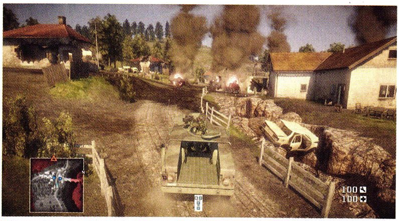
It's always more fun to be bad

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: DICE

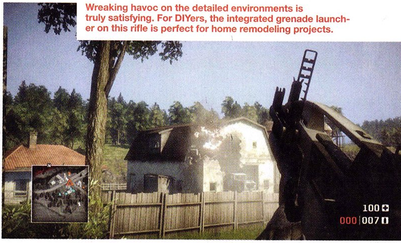
It doesn't take long for the inspirations behind this latest *Battlefield* to show themselves. The multiplayer-focused franchise brings with it a powerful, surprisingly entertaining helping of single-player explosive action for its debut on PS3. Picture, if you will, Lee Marvin's Dirty Dozen (but "streamlined" into a more game-manageable "Filthy Foursome") blended with the plot direction and style of the under-rated *Three Kings* and you'll be bang on track to get where *Battlefield: Bad Company* is heading.

To be honest, the notion of jailbird soldiers chin-wagging through a warzone had me readying the mute button in anticipation of a barrage of inane chatter. Kudos then to the writers who kept the dialogue snappy and the language T-rated (and as a result probably had to get more creative than if F-bombs were acceptable, and dropped whenever they couldn't think of anything clever to say). That's no mean feat when trying to bring to gaming life four ex-cons who have been given a chance to get fresh air in the Russian countryside, fighting for the good ol' U.S. of A. rather than rotting in a cell.

As Preston Marlowe, living just a hop, skip, and a jump in a near-modern future, it's unclear what crime you've committed, but you seem like a pretty nice guy, so maybe it was tax evasion and the IRS shanghaied you into active service. Your cohorts, Sarge, Sweetwater, and Haggard are similarly fun-loving folks, blessed with a sense of humor, but collectively you've got a hankering to get out and get rich. That glint in your squad's eye is 24-carat golden when you get the sniff of a cargo of bling; when a shiny ingot falls from the back of a fleeing Russian truck the subtle animation of the knowing looks among the foursome—and



The map view provides tons of information, including the location of enemies when you find them, your objectives, and also the collectables still to be found on the map.



Wreaking havoc on the detailed environments is truly satisfying. For DIYers, the integrated grenade launcher on this rifle is perfect for home remodeling projects.

newfound purpose—is startling and perfectly motivating.

Getting started on this pursuit may take a little while as the default control setup is unlike most others you'll have played in a first-person shooter. Eschewing the current vogue of allowing you to slink into cover to automatically heal serious battlefield wounds you need to monitor your 100-point health total and jab yourself with a constantly refilled syringe when you get caught in the line of fire. The L1 then R1 combo to select the syringe, and administer the shot becomes second nature eventually (you'll use it often), but until that point the first few missions may prove deceptively tricky. In fact, throughout *Bad Company,* as your rag-tag band traipse through military installations, SAM sites, cargo ports, and even golf courses (complete with drivable carts) you'll find a keenly aware Russian army resistance. Displaying neat tactics it only takes a couple of well-placed soldiers to pin your squad down. That's when your own tactical awareness of the battlefield is needed. Your buddies can lay down covering fire (though you don't direct them to do so) while you sneak around for a flanking attack. Or you can zoom down the scope of your massive arsenal of scavenged weapons and target one of the liberally placed explosive barrels, ammo caches, or gas cylinders.

Any hit will send flames soaring (and hopefully enemy bodies, too) and demolish chunks of the scenery or buildings. Trees fall under fire and tank tracks. Building walls crumble dynamically sending chunks of dense particle debris scattering into the air. Fences splinter. Vehicles explode. This battlefield is dangerous, but its style and fun gameplay substance is thoroughly enjoyable. So you may die often, but the checkpoints are frequent, and you're credited for the tanks or enemies you've already offed so you don't have to go through serious do-overs.

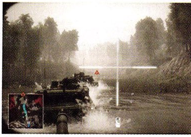
All of which indicates a game design that's expertly considered and executed. Each mission offers plenty of replayability as you scavenge for gold and weapons (you can carry one main weapon and another "item" that could be an RPG for helicopter or tank takedowns, or laser designator to call in a user-controlled guided bomb strike, or a super-wrench to mend vehicles).

The variation of infantry-like maneuvers, driving tanks, jeeps, and golf carts, blended with the rich textures of different locations of the single-player game extends doubly to the multiplayer matches. Firing artillery and static machine guns is one option. Leading the charge in team-based matches that require coordinated attacks using all available vehicles is another. The breadth of options is impressive, though we weren't able to test for lag issues out in the real PS3 online world by press time.

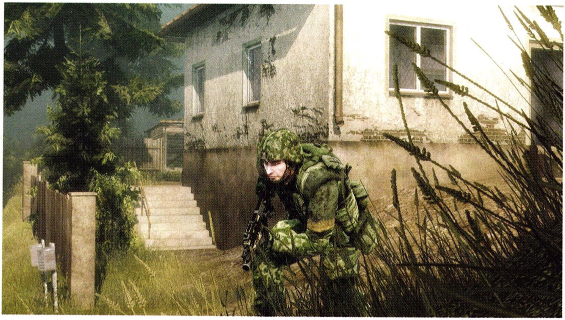
Once you've grasped the concept, and grappled with the controls, you'll find *Battlefield: Bad Company* to be a truly entertaining shooter that offers a fresh experience in the increasingly crowded first-person shooter genre. It's not the best-looking game, it's clunky in its controls, but it delivers where it counts with a fun experience that will keep you entertained through to its conclusion. Good times.

Rob Smith

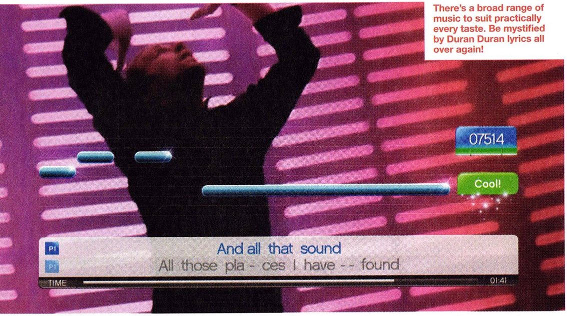
★★★★½



You won't hear many genuinely laugh-out-loud gags from your buddies, but at least you won't be wishing to shoot them dead.

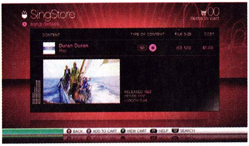


Your squad's status with the military dives when one of your crew wanders off into supposed neutral territory, creating a potential international "incident," and also providing the perfect cover for your AWOL team to perform covert operations.


07514
Cool!
P1
And all that sound
All those pla - ces I have - - found
TIME
01:41

There's a broad range of music to suit practically every taste. Be mystified by Duran Duran lyrics all over again!

SingStar for PS3 features more top-tier artists than ever before—like Coldplay. Coldplay is cool. See? It says so right in the screenshot.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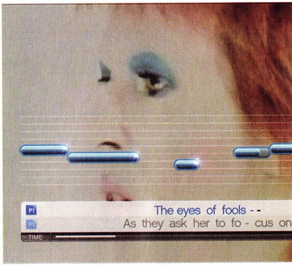

P1
The eyes of fools - -
As they ask her to fo - cus on
TIME

David Bowie's "Let's Dance" is in the game, but you'll have to head online to access other tracks like "Life on Mars," pictured here.

SingStar

The prolific PS2 performer makes its debut on the PS3 stage

PS3 PRICE: $39.99 Game Only; $59.99 with Microphones ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: SCEE London Studio

Never underestimate the power of superstar dreams. It can be the delusional impulse that compels people to humiliate themselves auditioning for a nationally-televised show, but it can also be the catalyst that transforms the life of one aspiring vocalist in the show's season finale. And apparently, it's the impetus behind *five* PS2 *SingStar* games.

Five. Think about that. This year's PS3 gaming superstars, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Grand Theft Auto,* are both only on iteration number *four!* Somewhere out there are a lot of people who are no longer satisfied with singing into their shampoo-bottle microphones while showering. And thanks to *SingStar's* new online features, they're rinsing off their bath-time anonymity for a shot at the big time. Yup, they're bad as Hell and they're not going to hide it anymore!

Aside from a more polished presentation, the game itself has changed very little from the PS2 examples. Sing Solo or Duet, or switch to Battle or Pass The Mic mode for some party time variety and fun. This *SingStar* game is the most adept effort thus far in the series, but the core in-game experience is more evolutionary than revolutionary. It works; it's solid; but it's difficult to even consider it in the classic gaming sense—it's more of an interface than an interactive vehicle.

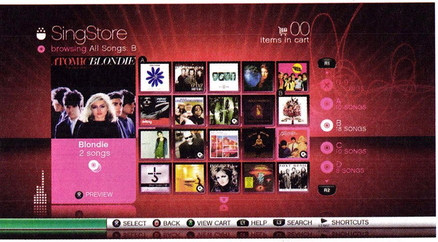
Once again there are 30 mostly contemporary songs included that represent a broad range of music genres. Tastes vary, but I'd rate this line-up stronger than average. But thanks to the all-new online SingStore, you can purchase additional tracks from a catalog of hundreds of downloadable songs. It'll cost you $1.49 per song, but your burgeoning music career is no longer constrained by the tyranny of music that doesn't inspire you.

Thanks to the new My SingStar online site, PS3 owners can also upload their vocal stylings to be, er, appreciated by a jury of peers. Utilize a PlayStation Eye (or other compatible USB camera) to upload videos and photos of your SingStar performances if you think your audio tracks alone don't communicate enough of your unique...you-ness.

Sound a little mean-spirited? *Au contraire*—this is where *SingStar's* real entertainment value begins to shine. Conservatively speaking, about one-percent of the uploads will be truly impressive, another nine-percent will be admirably talented, another 20-percent will be decidedly mediocre, and a full 70-percent will be either be intentionally or unwittingly atrocious. Anyway you cut it, there's an 80-percent chance that you're going to be entertained! I'm honestly looking forward to "experiencing" the top and bottom 10th-percentile of your performances.

Roger Burchill

★★★★


SingStore
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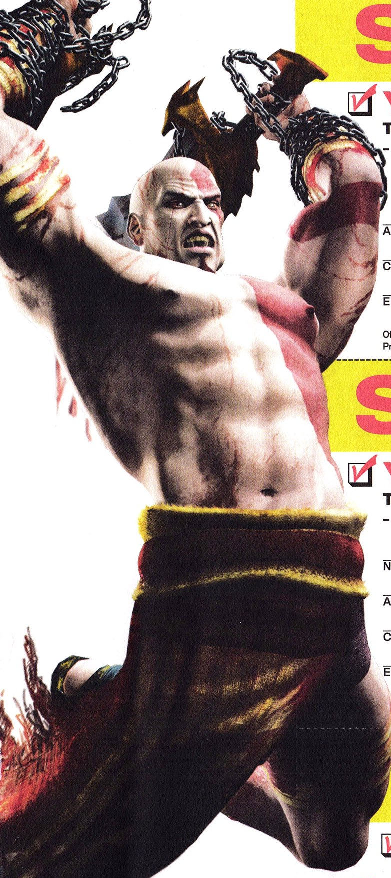
items in cart
ATOMIC BLONDIE
Blondie
2 songs
PREVIEW
R1
0-9 SONGS
A 10 SONGS
B 18 SONGS
C 10 SONGS
D 8 SONGS
R2
SELECT
BACK
VIEW CART
HELP
SEARCH
SHORTCUTS

SingStore and the My SingStar online sites are the franchise's greatest innovations to date. Build your own songlist for $1.49 for each additional download and revel in the performances posted by the SingStarry-eyed.

Think you've got what it takes, superstar? Direct us to you're My SingStar performance and if it's noteworthy, we will give a shout out in our Network section.



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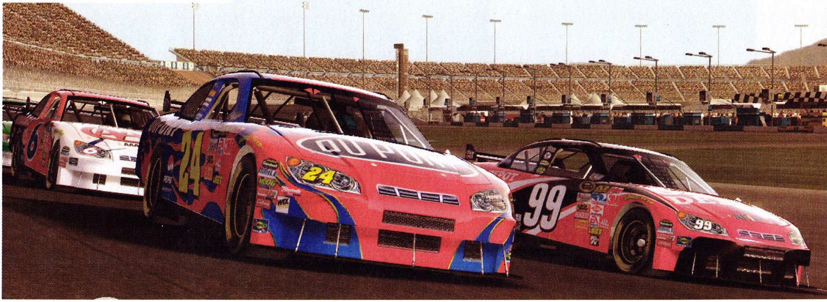
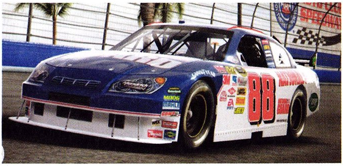
NASCAR 09 appears to have everything required for a place on the podium, but its uninspired gameplay leaves it at the back of the pack.



NASCAR 09

Further adding to the mystery of NASCAR's dominance of the U.S. racing scene

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: EA Sports DEVELOPER: Electronic Arts - Tiburon



A few road courses add a modicum of variety, but it's not good when a game's most memorable moment is encountering a right turn.

With the release of racing genre standouts like *GT5 Prologue* and *GRID*, my PS3 has been buzzing with the sound of engine's roaring and tires screeching in recent weeks. It's only right that EA's latest iteration of America's favorite racing series gets a slot on the starting line, but whereas uncanny realism propels *Prologue* and intense racing action fuels *GRID*, *NASCAR 09* seems content to putter along as…the NASCAR game.

Check under the hood and *NASCAR 09* seems to have the content to equal its genre rivals. You can compete in three different NASCAR series—the Craftsmen Truck series, the Nationwide series, and the top-tier Sprint Cup series—as your favorite NASCAR driver or create your own driver/car with the game's in-depth customization features. All the real-life tracks are available to race individually, for a season, or in career mode.

Unfortunately, once you're past the extensive feature list, the actual gameplay experience is just plain underwhelming. Car control is the main issue as Normal driving mode oversimplifies handling by neutering inputs while Pro mode's more impactful applications of the accelerator and brake merely result in ridiculously sensitive handling. You can fine-tune your car's mechanical settings to help tame the control issues, but precision and nuance don't come stock in *NASCAR 09*.

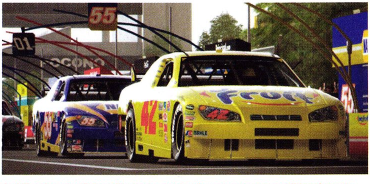
As for the graphics, the car and track models are serviceable, and if you don the NASCAR-tailgate-party-beer-goggles, the game looks okay. But examine the details and you discover car models that appear pasted onto the track, visible draw-in lines that mar the play perspective, and laughable smoke effects—the sloppy visuals are simply unacceptable for a next-gen platform game.

And then there's the matter of the yellow flags and left turns… *NASCAR 09*'s control issues guarantee you become intimately familiar with the game's Yellow Flag sequence—on some tracks, you can actually spend more time waiting for a restart than racing. And the hypnotic effect of left turns was never more evident than during my 25-lap race at Daytona. Emerging from the haze of a left-turn-after-left-turn zone out, I could have *sworn* I'd been racing *forever;* the end of the race *had* to be near. But when I checked the lap counter, I discovered that I was on lap…six!

Admittedly, *NASCAR 09* packs enough performance to avoid outright embarrassment, but you'll need the blind devotion of a diehard NASCAR fan to overlook the game's disappointing lack of polish.

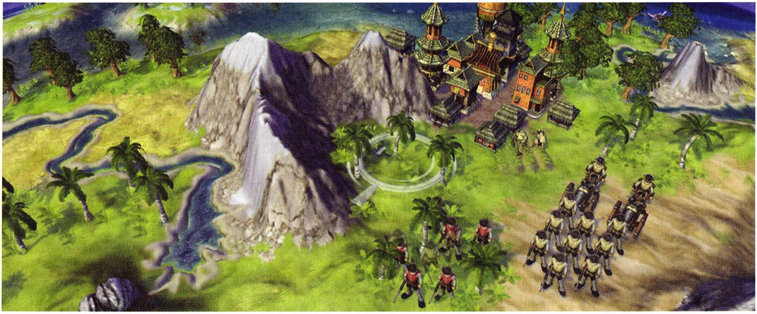
Roger Burchill

★★½



A skill-enhancing Driver Challenge mode allows you to earn additional reputation points. REP points (also awarded for in-race performance) are the key to moving up the roster of real-world sponsors.

The Yellow flag is used to signal an accident, debris, or weather related issue on the track. In *NASCAR 09*, it's used to kill the majority of time between the start of a race and its end.



Put three of the same soldier-type together to form an army. Fighting skirmishes earns attack bonuses that give you an edge in battle.

During a multiplayer match, invite others into a separate channel to make private deals. We won't judge you if you later stab them in the back. All's fair in love, war, and world domination.

Sid Meier's

Civilization Revolution

A legend of game design brings turn-based strategy to PS3

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Firaxis

World domination comes to those who wait. As do other good things, like the console adaptation of Sid Meier's turn-based *Civilization* series, aptly titled *Civilization Revolution,* as this latest offering departs from its PC-focused predecessor in two significant ways.

First, it's quicker. Whereas a multiplayer round of *Civilization IV* could take eight, 12, even upwards of 20 hours before it reached a resolution, a match in *Revolution* only takes two or three. But that doesn't mean the game's been stripped of its depth. The 16 civilizations (each displaying the expected historically inspired bonus, such as navigation skills for the Spanish), four time periods, randomly generated small-ish maps featuring varied terrain and hosts of barbarians, and an assortment of Wonders and Great People (both of which grant power-ups to your cities, like faster population growth), can make *Revolution* quite intimidating to newcomers. But five difficulty levels (in the single-player game), the lowest of which offers helpful tips to ease the learning process, allows novices to painlessly discover that micro-managing is what makes turn-based strategy games fun.

Second, the controls have been completely revamped for the Sixaxis. L1 accesses your city menu (where you decide which troops, buildings, or Wonders to construct), R1 opens your diplomacy tab (through which you can wage war, threaten other world leaders for gold, exchange skills, or pay other countries to start wars), and R2 gives you a quick glance of your current resources (gold, culture, and science). Switch between troops with the D-pad and move them with the left analog. It still sounds complicated, but once you get into the game, it's a cinch to get to where you want to be, whether that's a menu, a distant city, or the front lines.

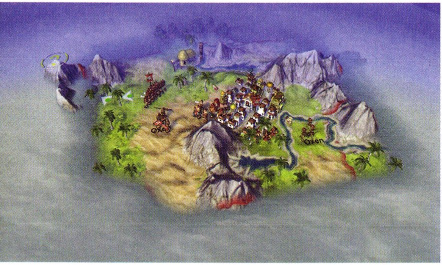
Victory can be achieved in one of four paths: militaristic, economic, cultural, or technological. The first civilization to conquer all the capital cities, build the World Bank (which can only be unlocked by obtaining 20,000 gold), form the United Nations (which requires attracting Great People to your cities), or launch a rocket to Alpha Centauri wins the match.

As much fun as it is to build vast armies and battle AI or create fabulously cultured cities, the highlight of *Revolution* is the multiplayer. Up to four players can test their strategic prowess via the PSN in Free for All, Team, or Head to Head matches. And it only takes a couple hours to net a victory.

We told you that world domination comes to those who wait. Luckily for *Revolution* players, the wait on PS3 isn't quite as long.

Teresa Dun

★★★★



Until you explore past your own home base, the rest of the map is covered in the fog of war. All the maps contain five civilizations, including your own, and are just large enough to not feel cramped.

Angry green hero protests game that doesn't let him showcase his abilities. *Grrr!*

Hulk isn't the only green giant. The film's crew worked hard to limit its carbon emissions during production.

The Incredible Hulk

When will we get a superhero game that's truly super?

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: Edge of Reality

This is not a *Hulk* game. This is a movie game that happens to have the Hulk in it, and as such, comes off as more "hired hit" than "labor of love." It definitely has a few amusing moments, but thanks to some underlying problems, the experience is ultimately just mediocre.

Naturally, you assume the role of Marvel's not-so-Jolly Green Giant as he avoids capture attempts by the U.S. Army and tries to thwart the vague but clearly evil machinations of a scientist-led group called the Enclave. The plot and characters are both paper-thin, but the story is at least coherent enough to follow.

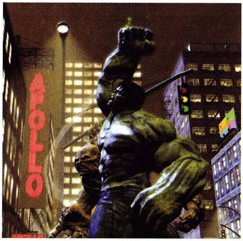
After a brief tutorial level, you're dropped into a fairly large and well-designed recreation of Manhattan where you either escape capture or pursue evil through a string of terribly generic missions: go here and beat up these guys, go there and pick up that thing, and so on. "Variety" comes in three flavors: tedious, aggravating, and confounding.

You're better off simply roaming around the city *GTA*-style, wreaking as much havoc as possible. Beating the life out of buildings and taxis actually proves to be entertaining, especially since you can unlock new moves and bonus material while doing so. Even more fun is exploiting the Hulk's ability to leap several stories into the air and climb any building at will—a marriage of gameplay elements that falls somewhere between *Assassin's Creed* and *Rampage World Tour*.

But even this wholesome destruction isn't safe from the game's lackluster technical and design work. The AI is brain-dead, the physics seem to ignore friction and gravity, and the graphics suffer from massive pop-in and bland textures. Worse, the destruction is all pre-rendered—not dynamic—meaning objects fall apart exactly the same way every time. For a PS3 title, that's just plain lazy. But for a *Hulk* title, that's utterly disappointing—the game just doesn't live up to its potential.

Scott Butterworth

★★½



The controls can sometimes be unresponsive, with noticeable lag between a button press and the in-game execution.

If you haven't seen the movie or read the book, you're going to have a tough time following the story.

The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian

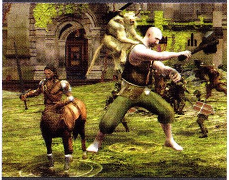
Proudly living up to the movie game stereotype

PS3 MSRP: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Disney Interactive Studios DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales

I swear I've played this game before. It just feels so…familiar. The forever-unchanging gameplay, the contrived and overly simplistic puzzles, the vaguely incoherent storyline (puzzling because it even contained clips from the actual movie). Oh, of course! It's another soullessly constructed, licensed movie game (not to say that all film-based games fall into that category, though many do). I can't knock it for being terrible since all of its parts (combat, graphics, menus, etc.) are more or less in working order, but even so, the experience remains mind-numbingly generic and manufactured. Even fans of the film should be warned, this game lacks the soul to retroactively enhance your movie-going experience. Stick to *LEGO* games, Traveller's Tales.

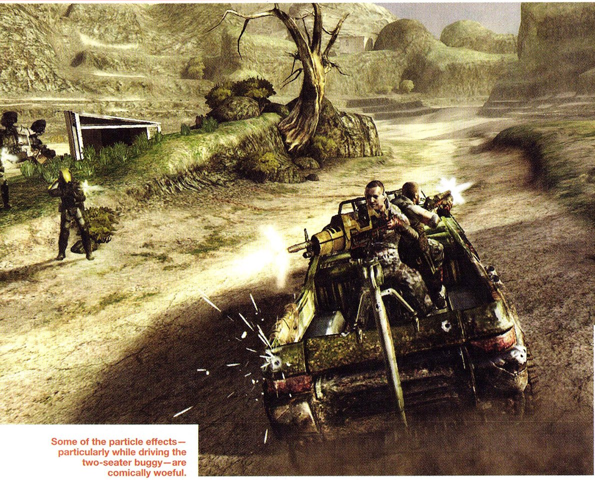
Scott Butterworth

★★

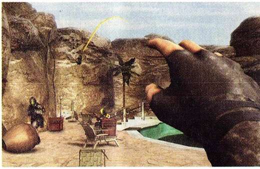


You'll control 20 different characters over the course of *Narnia*, but none are particularly distinctive or memorable to play.

The collectible keys that allow you to unlock bonus content respawn every time you re-enter a room. Cheap? Maybe, but we don't mind!



Some of the particle effects—particularly while driving the two-seater buggy—are comically woeful.



You can only carry two different weapons at a time, but when working for the Promised Hand you can scavenge ammo from other weapon types and use it in your favorite firearm. That includes creating nectar grenades that can cause Mantel soldiers to overdose and turn weapons on each other.

PS3 | R

HAZE

Drugs have a lot to answer for

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Free Radical

As a PS3 exclusive shooter *Haze* rated high on our "ones to watch" board. It wasn't just some slick visuals (in screenshots) that piqued our interest, but also the track record of developer Free Radical. We'd been fans of the studio's *Timesplitters* and after extensive discussions with, and demos from the team through the development cycle, we came to expect a game that would help define the action genre on PS3.

That'll teach us to trust.

It's not that *Haze* has turned out to be a complete bust. It does have several redeeming qualities. It's just that it ultimately seems so, well, half-assed—at the very least, half-baked. Like several solid ideas made the design drawing board and then when implemented, needed, but didn't get, the polish, touch-up (or scrapping if it just wasn't working) that elevates the true AAA game release.

Opportunities missed are often more disappointing than those that never stood a chance, and so it is with *Haze.* The story of Shane Carpenter, a Mantel Corporation sergeant who discovers that the nectar drug-tinted goggles through which he has viewed the world paint a picture quite different from reality, is shallow even when it tries to stretch its credibility into the realm of morality play. This nectar is a potent tonic, imbuing the user with extra speed and constitution (the amount of damage you can sustain), giving the soldiers who use it a significant edge, particularly against the scrappy, but ill-equipped Promised Hand rebels. But like many drugs, too much nectar can have a seriously debilitating effect. Take a second hit too soon after you've juiced up and your vision will blur and you may lose control of your faculties and begin spraying bullets in all directions, and likely at your own squad mates.

But in the case of *Haze,* spraying a few shots in your squad buddies' direction might elicit one of the few clear joys throughout the plodding campaign trail. Those guys are morons of chest-bumping, hoo-yeahing bravado. So when the story plays its twist card, dumping you in a swamp where you're now hunted by Mantel forces, job one is

Squad mates on either side demonstrate reasonable AI, but frequently wandered right in front of my line of fire. They also mysteriously appear out of the blue (as do some enemies) on frequent occasions.

to melee a former squaddie, steal his gun, then blast him in the face. The developers deserve thanks for that small mercy alone.

Carpenter's side switch is precipitated by a nectar disruption. This glitch in the drug matrix opens his eyes to scenes that the steady nectar infusion masks. Through one scripted moment an area is revealed as littered with the corpses of likely innocent victims of Mantel brutality; these soldiers don't even realize the devastation they bring. So that's another good reason to switch sides and follow Gabriel "Skin Coat" Merino's insurrection.

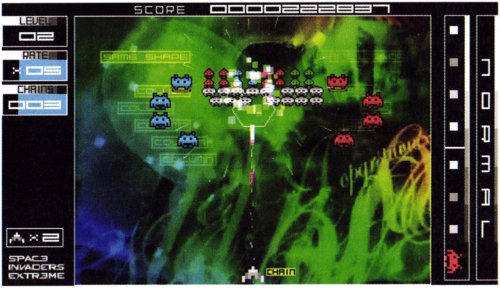
To balance out losing your ability to shoot-up, the rebel forces have their own handy abilities. Aside from a double-tap dodge move (which I simply never needed to use), you can also "play dead" by hitting L2 when you're actually near death. The nectar-fueled Mantel soldiers can't see you when you're pretend dead, so that will give a chance for your new squad mates to clear out the danger before you stumble to your feet. All these mechanics keep you occupied while traipsing back and forth through bland level designs dotted with awkwardly flickering textures and some plain nonsense situations. A couple of driving levels (and an in-chopper shooting scene) play almost like railed shooters of old.

These mechanics don't improve online, and the number of game servers available was very, very limited (three max each time we checked in.) At least the single-player campaign—that you can play through co-operatively with three friends—is mercifully short at around eight to 10 hours. But you'll leave wondering where the promise went, and how damaging this lackluster experience will be to Free Radical's longer-term outlook.

Rob Smith

★★½

Maybe Free Radical lost interest in *Haze* when—so it's rumored—it signed on with LucasArts to develop *Star Wars Battlefront 3*.



The invasion comes in all shapes and sizes. These wee aliens can be tough to hit with standard shots.

The original *Space Invaders* **was the first arcade game** without a time limit, in which you could play until you ran out of lives.

Space Invaders Extreme

Blast from the past

PSP PRICE: $19.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Square Enix DEVELOPER: Taito

Here's a phrase I never thought I'd utter: "I can't wait to pick up the *Space Invaders Extreme* soundtrack."

Really, I mean it. Granted, I'm a bit of a game soundtrack geek. I dig game music, and I'm not apologizing for it. But still—*Space Invaders?* Yeap. With a collection of toe-tapping techno tracks, the upbeat score is more than a modern backdrop to an ancient game; it's a pleasure unto itself.

The music isn't the only surprise in this delightful diversion. In celebration of its 30th anniversary, *Space Invaders* has been given a complete overhaul. The result is a surprisingly addictive shooter whose simple mechanics belie a deep, strategic experience. The core gameplay is basically untouched: You move left and right, and you shoot upward at waves of descending aliens. But everything else has been given such a grand upgrade that this *Extreme* version transcends the original's now-stodgy gameplay to offer up something refreshingly different.

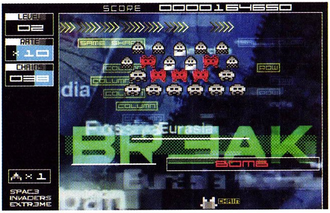
This time around, the aliens come in different shapes, colors, and sizes, all of which play a key role in your strategic approach to taking them down. Need a bomb power-up? Then make sure you hit four red invaders in a row. Can't avoid the shrapnel from those spinning invaders? Try to nail enough black invaders to release a shield power-up. The variety of attack patterns, power-ups, and invader types—including some humongous screen-filling bosses—adds so much to the gameplay, making every level a unique experience that can be tackled in entirely different ways.

I could have used a few more levels in the easy to mid-range, but that's a rather minor quibble. The fact that I even want more levels in a *Space Invaders* game is testament enough to how much fun this one is. Of course, the music helps too—especially since each sound effect is perfectly keyed to the music, adding to the trance-like joy of blasting away at wave after wave of alien invaders.

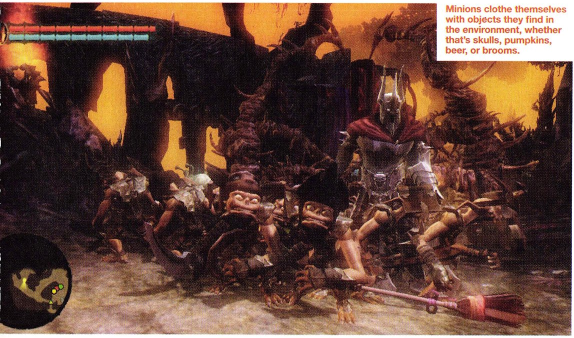
Gary Steinman

★★★★

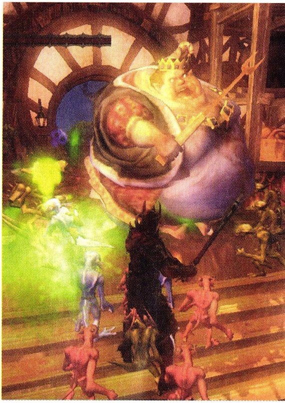
PSP | R



Chain together enough hits and you enter Break mode, where you can boost your score by a factor of 10 for every consecutive invader you shoot down.



Minions clothe themselves with objects they find in the environment, whether that's skulls, pumpkins, beer, or brooms.



The King of the hobbits—is that Frodo Baggins or Samwise Gamgee? Nah, couldn't be…

Overlord:

Raising Hell

What's it like to be evil? Chaotic, narcissistic, and so much fun

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: Triumph Studios

PS3 | R

Here's the most important lesson I learned from *Overlord: Raising Hell*: having an army of goblin-like demons bow to your every whim *changes* a person. I'd never thought of myself as evil, but why do I grin when my little darlings tear apart a herd of bleating sheep? Why do I want to caress them when they gift me with stolen gold? Why do I purr when they cry in adoration, "For the Overlord!"? I sacrifice them in altars to regain my own health. I literally craft them into my armor for the bonus their meager little demon spirits imbue. Yet I don't feel a twinge of regret. They are my servants. They are meant to die for me. And how could I feel guilty when they obey so willingly?

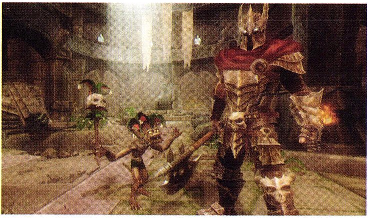
Raising Hell supplied me with four minion types: browns (brawlers), reds (fire-flingers), greens (backstabbers who can stealth), and blues (swimmers who can resurrect dead troops). I led my rampaging army through disgustingly sunny meadows, soothing graveyards, and beautifully decaying castles to slaughter parodied versions of fantasy creatures. I could have participated in the bloodshed (I have weapons and spells), but why would I when I could just point (by holding R2) and my minions would pounce on whatever was ahead, be it bloody killer unicorns or crates of treasure? If I wanted more control, the right analog let me manually move my peons. I could also split my minions into groups based on color type and camp each group at different spots. This was useful; during my evil pilgrimages, I often relied on group positioning to pull off the diabolical tactics that sprung into my ingenious mind.

At times, however, the control scheme limited me. If I wanted to create groups that weren't just based on color, it required more finger-juggling than an all-powerful master of evil like I should have to condescend to. The controls were sufficient but not polished enough to allow high-level micromanaging. Also, as the Overlord, I should have ultimate control! So why did I sometimes spend hours wandering around lost or not knowing which quests I was sufficiently skilled to attempt?

Despite a few frustrations, I found *Overlord: Raising Hell* an enjoyable romp through a fantasy realm so comically twisted it could make Tolkien grimace. And oh my, what a delightful power trip it is, too.

Teresa Dun

★★★½



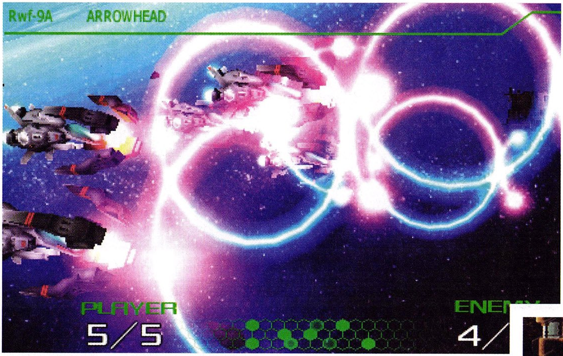
My jester flatters me with plot-relevant titles, like "Desecrator of the Sacred Grove," "Appreciator of Voluptuous Assets," and "Purger of the Perverted Paladin."

My Evil Lair

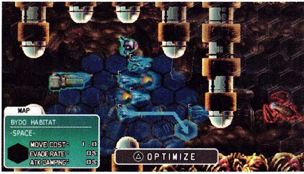
My castle began in ruins. But as I found forges, cranes, and even a mistress, I was able to customize my armor and buy upgrades to my castle's appearance. An arena in the basement lets me train my minions.

Overlord has been out on PC and Xbox 360 for a while, but the PS3's *Raising Hell* includes the original game plus all the downloadable content released thus far.

Other franchises to make genre jumps: *Mega Man, Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest, Pac-Man,* and *Sonic the Hedgehog.*



Linking up with a "Force" sends your ship's firepower through the roof.



Most of the time in *R-Type Command* is spent going blind on screens like this, trying to figure out which unit is which.

R-Type Command

A new direction for the R-Type franchise

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: Atlus DEVELOPER: Irem Software Engineering

When *R-Type Final* was released back in 2004, I assumed it meant the end of the series. That's what "final" usually means, anyway. (Guess I should've known better… *"Final" Fantasy* was hardly final.) In any case, I was surprised when I heard about another *R-Type* title. But now that I've played through *R-Type Command*, I can safely say that my assumption was, in many ways, correct. Rather than yet another side-scrolling shooter, *Command* leads the series in a bold new direction: it's a hex-based strategy game that requires more wit than reflex, and definitely more patience than most people possess.

Command's gameplay is slow to an extreme—an extreme that's pretty much inexcusable for a portable game. Battles can literally extend over a full hour or more, as you squint at your PSP, ordering your little ships around the convoluted battlefield, constantly navigating menus to figure out which of the all-too-similar-looking ships is best suited for your next move.

The visual monotony means levels blur into a repetitive haze early in the game, despite the various backgrounds plastered under the hexagonal playing board. There's no variety—each level plays out almost exactly the same. And unfortunately, that extends to the tactics required to make it through each challenge. It's just two huge armadas butting heads until the more powerful ends up the victor…over and over again.

And while some 3D cutscenes do their darnedest to break up the visual boredom, they take so long to load that I wanted to turn them off after the first level. Especially since I had to play said opening level multiple times. *Command* throws you into the proverbial deep end immediately, forcing you to figure out the game via repeated failure rather than a reasonable learning curve.

R-Type Command isn't a bad game per se; it's just incredibly average, with too many flaws to overlook. Strategy gamers will find very little in the subject matter to keep them going, and *R-Type* fans will find a game that's simply not very user-friendly, and strangely, in a completely different genre from previous *R-Type* titles.

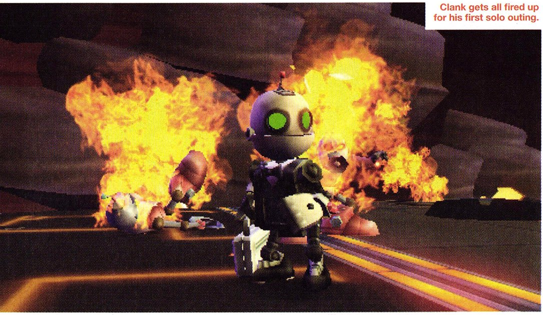
Greg Sewart

★★½

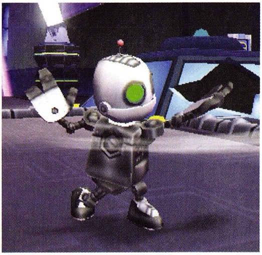
The battle screens sure are pretty… too bad they take an eternity to load.

Revisionism

Since the first *R-Type's* release over 20 years ago, the backstory for the enemy Bydo Empire has been constantly evolving. During the 26th century, mankind created a bioweapon meant to destroy everything in its path. When they lost control over the weapon, they managed to banish it to another dimension. Unfortunately, the weapon—the Bydo— flourished there, and eventually found its way back to our dimension…but about 300 years earlier than it was actually created. It's like *Back to the Future* meets *Alien* in *The Twilight Zone.*



Clank gets all fired up for his first solo outing.



The tux suits Clank. Please, hold the applause.

The Tanglevine: a gardener's worst nightmare, a spy's best friend.

Secret Agent Clank

Robots in disguise

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: High Impact Games

There comes a time in the life of any self-respecting sidekick when he must step out of the shadow cast by the hero and emerge as a true star on his own merits.

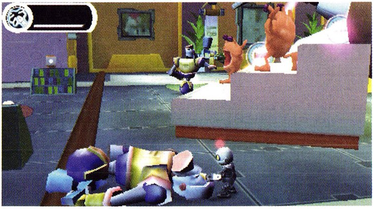
For Clank, the time is now.

Oh, he's been ready. Indeed, for many a *Ratchet & Clank* fan, the sardonic tin can has been the true star of the series—the lovable sidekick who humanizes (Lombaxizes?) the furry mechanic upon whose back he's spent much of the previous games. Like all good heroes, Clank is emerging in a moment of crisis: Ratchet has been imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit, and it's up to the diminutive robot to don his tuxedo, suit up with his favorite spy gear, and embark on a quest to find out who's trying to frame his best pal.

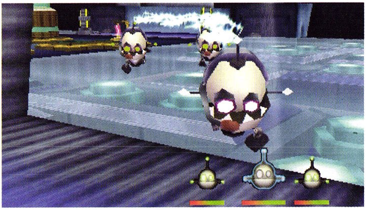
And therein lies the gameplay mechanic that ensures Clank is more than just a Ratchet clone. Embracing the storyline, the game incorporates several spy-like innovations (for the series, at least), including stealth kills and sneak-'em-up sequences. After all, he may be an expert in Clank Fu, but our robot buddy is too tiny to overpower his numerous foes by brute force alone, so the missions are set up to prioritize stealth and efficiency over sheer strength. Don't get me wrong: Clank's no Solid Snake. But it sure is fun to sneak up behind a snoozing robot to pull off a stealth takedown (triggered by inputting the correct four-button sequence), or to steal someone's identity using your Holo-Monocle, then slink around a level avoiding various pitfalls.

But it's not all stealth. As is customary for the franchise, Clank can acquire numerous upgradeable weapons—including

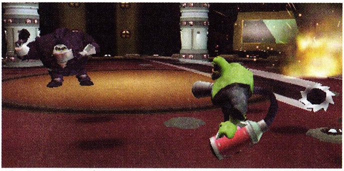
David Kaye, voice of Clank, also played the role of Decepticon leader Megatron in five Transformer series.



Sneak up on a guard and you can knock him out without alerting the others.



Send in your Gadgebots to solve a few puzzling problems.



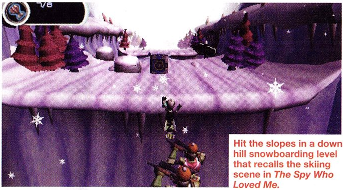
Chewing up the scenery with bombastic aplomb, Caption Qwark steals the game with some bizarre boss levels.

my new favorite, the Tanglevine, a flower that blossoms into a vicious foe-gobbling predator. Clank also puts his smooth moves to the test in a series of incredibly creative rhythm/music boss battles. The Gadgebots also return in some perfunctory yet mildly amusing strategy levels; you command and control a trio of bots as they work together to solve a series of uninspired puzzles. The biggest surprise, however, comes from the Captain Qwark levels. The bombastic blowhard has his own set of missions chronicling his purported exploits, all of which unfold as absurdist boss battles.

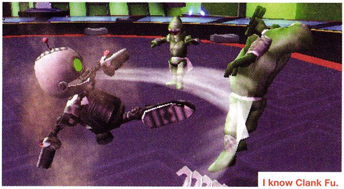
Of course, we can't forget Ratchet, who has his own levels as well—all of which I could have lived without. Highlighting everything that's wrong with the handheld iterations of this franchise, the Ratchet levels focus on pure arena combat, and they simply fail to be fun due to the PSP control conundrum: No dual analog sticks means strafing (a key component to the combat) is mapped to the D-pad, with camera control moved to the shoulder buttons. It's uncomfortable, and it doesn't work very well. This strafing problem persists throughout the game (along with some other quirks, like slippery platforms and a sticky camera), but they're more easily overlooked in the other missions, where combat isn't the priority. That said, perhaps we should thank Ratchet for botching his segments; his weakness only makes Clank look that much stronger. Welcome to the big leagues, Clank.

Gary Steinman

★★★½



Hit the slopes in a downhill snowboarding level that recalls the skiing scene in *The Spy Who Loved Me.*



I know Clank Fu.

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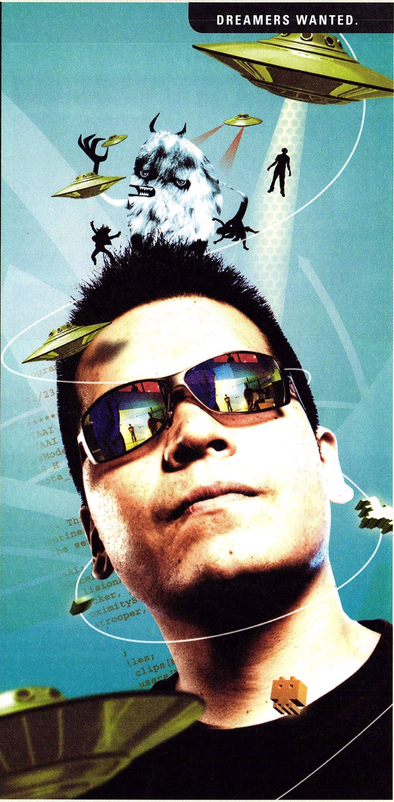

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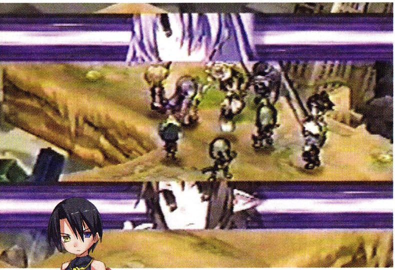
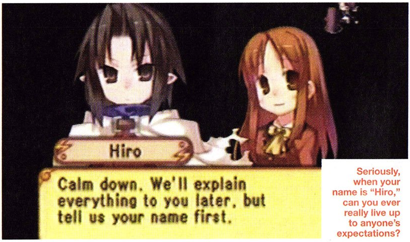


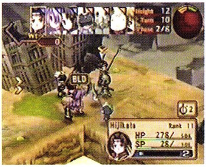
Keep your friends close to execute the team attack, which deals extra damage for no additional cost.



Hiro

Calm down. We'll explain everything to you later, but tell us your name first.

Seriously, when your name is "Hiro," can you ever really live up to anyone's expectations?



Battlegrounds "float" over 2D backdrops for a very retro look.

Chaos Wars

The B Team of cross-franchise smorgasbords

PS2 PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: O~3 Entertainment DEVELOPER: Idea Factory

"Sir, we need to make a cross-franchise turn-based strategy game. Which characters would you like me to enlist?"

"How about that plucky Mario fellow? Has he been in a tactical RPG yet? I like his mustache. Or how about some of the *Final Fantasy* crew? Or that spy…what's his name? Spider? Cobra?"

"Snake, sir. And they're all previously engaged in other cross-franchise titles at the moment."

"Well, then, what are our options?"

"According to my data, *Growlanswer*, *Gungrave*, *Shadow Hearts*, and *Spectral Souls* are all under-tapped franchises. Also, *Shinsengumi Gunraw Den*, *Shadow Hearts*, *Blazing Souls*, *Gakuen Toshi Vara Noir*, and *Spectral Force* are available. Shall I give them the go-ahead?"

Okay, so the above is purely a speculative dramatization, but Idea Factory's choice to use what may be the all-time least known group of "all-stars" in its cross-franchise strategy-RPG boggled me so much that I had to do something to explain it.

The idea behind *Chaos Wars* is that various characters from the aforementioned franchises have been pulled from their native dimensions and dropped into a new world. To find their way out, they have to work together. What follows is a very anime-ish adventure, with as much time given to dramatic dialogue (where heroes discuss whether they like or dislike each other) as to actual battlefield combat.

Unfortunately, neither of these two main elements work particularly well.

Lengthy story bits suffer from some of the worst voice acting since Barry declared Jill a "master of unlocking" in *Resident Evil*. The English-speaking actors phone in their performances, to the point that they don't even use consistent pronunciation of the lead character's name. And though you can (mercifully) switch to the Japanese voices, the subtitles are horribly awkward, reading like a bad translation from someone for whom English is a second or third language.

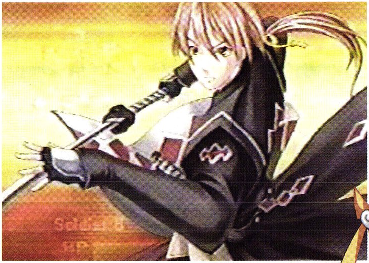
The combat does have some intriguing underlying premises—characters can perform team attacks when positioned near each other or transform themselves into powered-up versions by using skill points—though none are revolutionary. Surviving battles mostly relies on those team moves, which leads to a lot of bunched-up heroes and very little in the way of real strategy.

Chaos Wars might draw in some—like fans of the obscure games it's based on, especially those who long for the days of hand-drawn characters and tiny battlefields—but its old-school aesthetic isn't enough to make up for the lackluster production values and uninspired game play.

Greg Sewart

★★

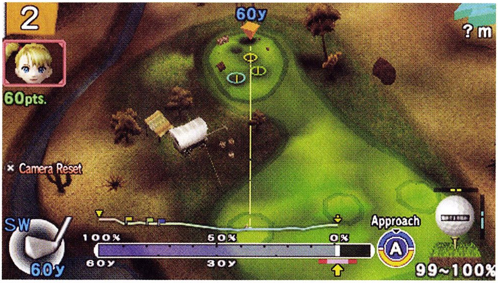
PS2 | R



Chaos Wars features tons of eye candy for fans of 2D anime-style artwork.

Other wacky lines in videogame dialogue history: "You spoony bard!" "The proof is in the pudding…of their doom."

A "hakama" is a piece of traditional Japanese clothing originally worn only by men. They're strips of stiff cloth tied at the waist. Today, they're worn most often with martial arts uniforms.



Tired of the tournaments? A mini-game challenges you to get hole-in-ones into cups worth different points.

Hot Shots Golf:

Open Tee 2

Hole-in-one action meets fashion "fore pas"

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: Sony Computer Entertainment Japan / Clap Hanz

A figure struts up to the tee. He's clothed in a girl's hakama, oversized boxing gloves, and a mullet-bandana combo that would make Solid Snake proud. He swings a loaf of bread, and his golf ball soars through the air, hits the pin, bounces onto the green, and then magically moves back toward the pin and drops in for a hole-in-one in a blue blaze of glory. Oh, and this distinctly male (and apparently pro) golfer looks to be all of nine-years-old and is named Jennifer.

If you've never tried *Hot Shots Golf*, you might be somewhat flabbergasted. But series old-timers know that beneath the absurd trappings lies an addictive golf game that caters to amateur and pro hackers alike.

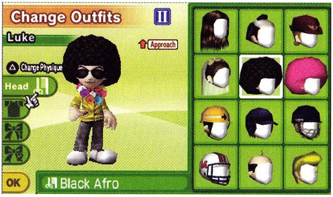
Open Tee 2 sticks to the formula introduced in *Open Tee*. You choose a character and work through tournaments to earn accessories, clothing, and hairstyles. Donning certain combinations of these items boosts your character's skill. As you use a character more, you not only earn special shots—like the homing shot detailed above—but you also unlock new characters (24 total, half of which are new) as you advance through 12 courses (six of which are new). As much as I love unlockables, the game felt a bit too much like RPG level-grinding after a few matches—with too many wins required to progress to the next stage.

To swing your golf club, you press the X button three times: once to activate the swing, once to choose your power, and once more to choose your impact, all of which is displayed on a bar below your golfer. While the system isn't flawed, I was disappointed that the new Advanced Shots system from *Out of Bounds* on PS3 wasn't incorporated. Being forced to glue your eyes to the bottom 10-percent of the screen really constrains the experience.

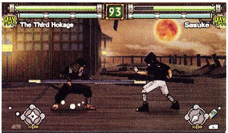
Despite these flaws, *Open Tee 2* is a must-buy for everyone who loved the first *Open Tee* or for rookies who want a gentle introduction to golf—if for no other reason than it finally offers full-blown 16-player online tournaments to complement its 8-player ad hoc.

Teresa Dun

★★★½



It won't turn you into a fashion diva, but combining some clothing items will give you a power, impact, spin, or other swing boost.



No *Naruto* game is complete without gratuitous screaming and cel-shaded visuals.

Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Heroes 2:

The Phantom Fortress

Like a Shadow Clone, this portable fighter looks great but lacks power

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai DEVELOPER: Bandai

At first glance, *Phantom Fortress* appears to pack a bang. In a new plotline, Orichimaru has summoned a gigantic tower in the heart of Konoha that's slowly poisoning the land. Your job is to lead Naruto up that tower, recruiting fellow ninja as you go. To progress past each of the 100 floors, you have to play either a short mini-game or fight a battle. While the snappy banter between cast members helps the journey feel like an actual *Naruto* anime episode (the option to use the original Japanese track accentuates that sentiment), the new mode becomes repetitive too quickly, with only a handful of mini-games.

As a fighting game, *Phantom Fortress* is decent. But once you dig past the great graphics and excellent fan service, the actual combat mechanics and roster of characters mimic those of other recently released *Naruto* titles. Even the hardest of hardcore fans might feel like they've been short-changed, though newcomers will find *Phantom Fortress* a relatively painless introduction to the franchise.

Tyler Nagata

★★★

Phantom Fortress's predecessor, *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Heroes*, was an English-exclusive title. *Phantom Fortress*, however, is not.

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LAN Primer

What is a LAN?

If you have never been to a LAN party before, the idea of packing up your computer, driving hours to get there can sound daunting. But that is only if you have never been to a large-scale LAN party. LAN parties with several hundred gamers are action-packed weekends with huge contests, great tournaments, and loads of prizes for attendees. People come in groups, while some people come by themselves – either way you leave with more friends than you came with. Some come to show off their awesome case mod, some to show off their skills, and some come just for time away from the normal grind of life to do what they love most – game. Most will find that once they have been to a large LAN party, they are caught up craving more and waiting for the next one to come to their region.

What is Showdown LAN?

Showdown LAN, presented by PC Gamer and Maximum PC magazines, parties with 500 computer gamers that come from all over the United States and Canada, to game for three days straight. Although Showdown has contests and prize giveaways, we pride ourselves in not being just another professional tournament. It's a LAN that caters to the everyday gamer. Showdown is about playing the games you love, loads of contests, meeting friends, and most importantly, having fun.

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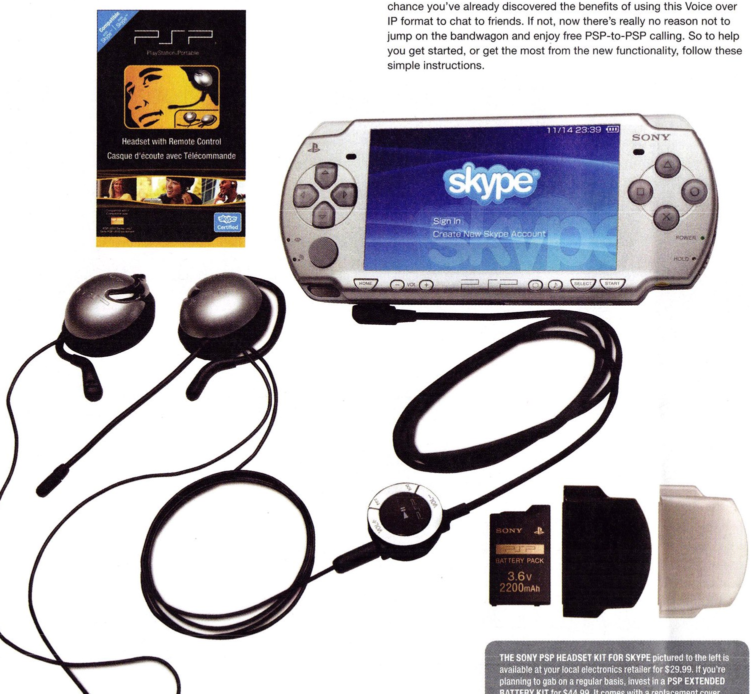
SKYPE ON PSP

Turning your PSP into a phone is cool enough. Turning it into a free phone device is awesome, and that's what you get if you take advantage of the newly integrated Skype functionality. Since the Skype software is free, and account setup is free (contributing to the 300 million user accounts created so far worldwide) there's a good chance you've already discovered the benefits of using this Voice over IP format to chat to friends. If not, now there's really no reason not to jump on the bandwagon and enjoy free PSP-to-PSP calling. So to help you get started, or get the most from the new functionality, follow these simple instructions.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3.6V
2200mAh

THE SONY PSP HEADSET KIT FOR SKYPE pictured to the left is available at your local electronics retailer for $29.99. If you're planning to gab on a regular basis, invest in a **PSP EXTENDED BATTERY KIT** for $44.99. It comes with a replacement cover (in black and silver) to prevent unsightly battery bulge and provides 6 to 8 hours of battery time per charge.

WHAT

Unlike cellular phones and traditional landlines, Skype uses Internet bandwidth to allow for free computer-to-computer calls, as well as calls to and from mobile/home phones (for a variable fee). Skype on PSP gives the service a fresh portable extension, allowing PSP owners to tap into a Wi-Fi network to communicate with other registered PSP owners, computer users, and standard telephone users.

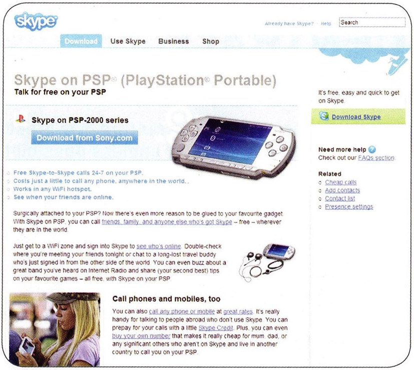
HOW

To use Skype on PSP, you'll need the following essentials:

- **PSP-2000 (Slim)**
- **PSP Headset with Remote Control**
- **Firmware v3.90 (released Jan. 30, 2008)**
- **Memory Stick Duo with 1MB free memory**

Alternatively, you can use the stand-alone PSP headphones with the PSP USB microphone, though the combined headset (released in May) is specifically designed for use with Skype and is both comfortable and effective. Be sure to check for the latest version of the PSP firmware before starting; go to Network Update under the Settings tab of the XMB to download the latest version if you need it. Once up to date, slide over to the Network tab on the far right of the XMB and select Skype.

If you already have a Skype account, you can easily use it on the PSP by entering your username and password. Those new to the Internet telephone fold will not need to fire up a PC to get started—simply select the Create New Skype Account option and the PSP web browser will point you in the right direction. Skype registration is completely free, as are calls to and from other PSP users and computers. It's the more interesting stuff—talking to standard phone users, receiving voicemail—that requires dropping a little change.



Skype on PSP® (PlayStation® Portable)

Talk for free on your PSP

Skype on PSP-2000 series

- Free Skype-to-Skype calls 24-7 on your PSP.
- Costs just a little to call any phone, anywhere in the world..
- Works in any WiFi hotspot.
- See when your friends are online.

Surgically attached to your PSP? Now there's even more reason to be glued to your favourite gadget. With Skype on PSP, you can call friends, family, and anyone else who's got Skype – free – wherever they are in the world.

Just get to a WiFi zone and sign into Skype to see who's online. Double-check where you're meeting your friends tonight or chat to a long-lost travel buddy who's just signed in from the other side of the world. You can even buzz about a great band you've heard on Internet Radio and share (your second best) tips on your favourite games – all free, with Skype on your PSP.

Call phones and mobiles, too

You can also call any phone or mobile at great rates. It's really handy for talking to people abroad who don't use Skype. You can prepay for your calls with a little Skype Credit. Plus, you can even buy your own number that makes it really cheap for mum, dad, or any significant others who aren't on Skype and live in another country to call you on your PSP.

It's free, easy and quick to get on Skype.

Need more help

Check out our FAQs section.

Related

- Cheap calls
- Add contacts
- Contact list
- Presence settings

WHY

There's little question about the quality of the basic service—the clear transmissions are notably better than most cell phone chats, and the user-friendly interface holds surprising depth. From the PSP, you can access your full list of contacts, view your call history, purchase Skype Credit for calls to/from phones, and even manage blocked users. The PSP might be more cumbersome than an iPhone or RAZR, but if you are carrying around the handheld anyway, the compact headset can be easily shoved into your pants pocket.

But let's be realistic: Skype on PSP probably shouldn't be your only phone. The official website warns that Skype cannot access emergency services (like 911), and you would have to leave the PSP on all the time to use it in place of a landline. Its reliance on home networks and hotspots also makes Skype on PSP much less versatile than a dedicated mobile phone.

Where Skype on PSP truly succeeds is as a supplemental service—use it for free calls with other Skype users (either via computer or PSP), for lengthier or long-distance calls to avoid burning through your mobile minutes, or to call in to a podcast recording with your Skype buddies. Additionally, international travelers used to outrageous hotel phone fees or prepaid cards can use Skype on PSP to make cheap calls home via a Wi-Fi hotspot.

MORE

SkypeIn: For $60 a year (or $18 for three months), you can buy a local number in one of 21 countries (including the U.S. and U.K.), allowing phone users to call your PSP and pay standard rates even if you're on the other side of the world.

SkypeOut: Call any landline or cell phone with reasonable per-minute rates (see sidebar). You'll have to prepay for Skype Credit to place such calls, but it can be far cheaper than calling international buddies on your national mobile plan.

Voicemail: Receive voice messages when you're not logged in to Skype for $20 a year (or $6 for three months). Not only will this come in handy while outside a Wi-Fi hotspot, but you won't have to leave your PSP on to hear from a pal.

Rates

Calling one of Skype's 30 most popular destinations—including the United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom—costs just over two cents ($0.021) per minute, though international fees for calls to mobile phones may be higher in select countries. Elsewhere, the rates vary significantly; listed below is a sampling of per-minute rates from locations both near and far.

Afghanistan - $0.355

Brazil - $0.054

Cuba - $1.025

Diego Garcia - $1.863

India - $0.092

Japan - $0.023

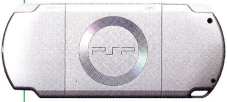
Kazakhstan - $0.175

Mexico - $0.099

Thailand - $0.113

Vatican City - $0.032

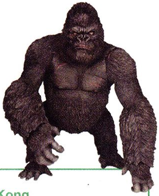
* A $0.039 connection fee applies to all SkypeOut calls originating from U.S. users.



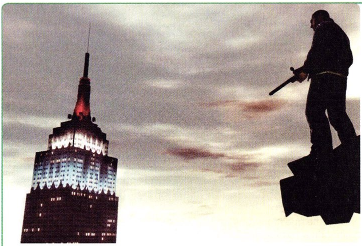
» MULTIPLAYER OPTIONS

GTA IV CENTRAL: DIY GAME MODES

Ah, the bustling streets of Liberty City: The culture, the lifestyle, the random shootings. Truly, this is a city of endless possibilities...



But you've already conquered its seedy underbelly (or just got tired of trying), and you're ready for something new. Well, we're here to help you get the most out of *GTA IV* by offering a few creative new ways to take advantage of the multiplayer Free Mode. But before we begin, we recommend turning cops off before you play these games (so they don't spoil your fun) and that we wholeheartedly endorse you adjusting the rules to your liking. After all, we're just here to give you ideas.



King Kong

LOCATION: THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING
NUMBER OF PLAYERS: 7-11
SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS: AUTO-AIM OFF (OPTIONAL)

This one comes courtesy of a few people from Rockstar's own PR and Quality Assurance team, and the name couldn't be any more appropriate. Basically, one player with a rocket launcher goes to the top of the Empire State Building while the other players (in groups of two or three) jump in helicopters and try to take the first guy down. To make things fair, we recommend that the players in the choppers refrain from using rockets, but anything else is fair game—including attacking the other choppers. And of course, the player who successfully takes down "Kong" takes on that role in the next round.

Pirates!

LOCATION: ANY BODY OF WATER
NUMBER OF PLAYERS: 8-12
REQUIREMENTS: VEHICLES PARKED, AUTO-AIM OFF (OPTIONAL)

In this game, players will pair up—one shooter and one driver—and grab a boat. A designated pair will serve as the target and will be given a 20-second headstart. The object of the game is for the shooters of the other boats to board the target boat. You're free to kill the target shooter or driver so long as you don't destroy their boat (after all, what good is sunken treasure?). But, naturally, they're free to defend themselves. The first shooter to successfully jump aboard the target ship wins the round and will serve as the next target boat. Weapons arrangements are entirely up to you.

Polaris vs. Bomber

LOCATION: ON AND ABOVE ANY BODY OF WATER
NUMBER OF PLAYERS: 4-8
REQUIREMENTS: VEHICLES PARKED, NO TEAM-KILLING, BLIPS OFF (OPTIONAL)

Here's another game involving boats and choppers that was inspired by the old Atari 2600 game called *Air-Sea Battle.* In that game, players controlled either bomber jets or ships that scrolled in opposite directions at the top and bottom of the screen. The object, of course, was to destroy your opponent's vehicles. Well, think of this as the 3D version of that. Players will divide evenly into two teams, manning either choppers or boats, and then attempt to blow the other team the hell up. For added fun, experiment with different weapons combinations, like grenades only for the helicopter team and rockets only for the boat team.

Ultimate Ring-Out

LOCATION: ANY HELIPAD
NUMBER OF PLAYERS: 1-ON-1
REQUIREMENTS: WEAPONS OFF OR MELEE WEAPONS ONLY

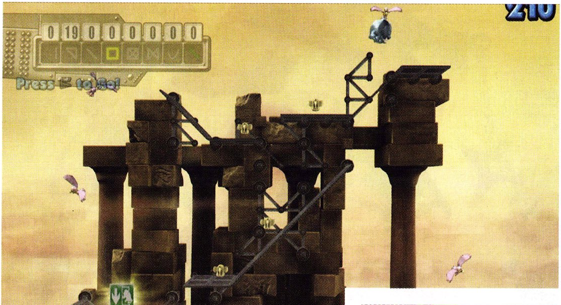
All right, this one's a bit less complicated. It doesn't require any real preparation or coordination, and it's perfect for when it's just you and a buddy online. Simply find a helipad—the higher and smaller the better—and attempt to shove your opponent off the edge. The result should be a brutal bare-knuckle boxing match with an added layer of strategy and a dramatic climax when the loser plummets several stories to the ground. Remember the win condition is a ring out, not just a pummeling to death!

PlayStation Network Games

Downloadable games and add-ons for less than the price of a ticket to the Circus Big Top. We say Yea or Nay.

+ **YEA** You'll get full value for your money.

- **NAY** No legs, no fun, no value.



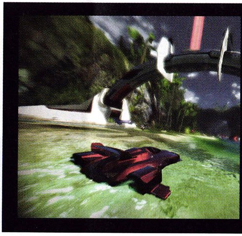
Elefunk

PRICE: $4.99 **DEVELOPER:** 8bit

+ Give an elephant a feather, and it might fly; give an elephant a shoddily built bridge, and it'll definitely fall to its comically tragic doom—which is exactly what you're trying to prevent in *Elefunk.*

The purpose of the game is to construct bridges out of limited quantities of rope, wood, and metal strong enough to handle the weight of elephants as they saunter, bounce, and roll their way through the 20 different stages. Sound easy? Not quite. Unless you're an old pro at bridge building or have a degree in mechanical engineering, you might find *Elefunk* a bit trickier than the kid-friendly graphics suggest. Especially when your bridge topples for the fifth time before an elephant's toe even touches it, and you have no idea why.

The inclusion of a single, not-even-close-to-sufficient tutorial translates to a gameplaying experience that blends equal parts wall-punching frustration and addictive delight. The game was engaging enough to garner my overall recommendation, but be warned, many won't have the patience or motivation to get past the opening levels. TD



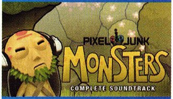
Fatal Inertia EX

PRICE: $29.99
DEVELOPER: KOEI

+ This was a tough call. Weapon-infused racing games aren't exactly new and exciting (especially when they aren't *Wipeout*), so at $30, we weren't convinced *Fatal Inertia* was worth the price. But it eventually won us over with its reasonably tight controls, deep vehicle customization, and arcadey brand of racing. The weapons aren't remarkable and the different modes lack diversity, but the basic formula still entertains, especially at higher difficulty levels where speeds are truly intense. Throw in online play and *voilà,* you've got a decent budget title, worthwhile if you lack the funds for pricier PS3 options. SB

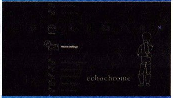
PLAYSTATION STORE

Our favorite downloads from the (PC) PlayStation Store this month:



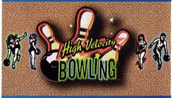
▶PIXELJUNK MONSTERS ALBUM

24 music tracks for only $2.99? Yes, please! Especially since the music is from one of our favorite PSN games. With songs titled "hyper puzzle like a sherbet," "cracked big egg," "48x8 60x6 90x4," and "lumiere tremblotante," even non-*PJM* fans should be intrigued.



▶ECHOCHROME BLACK THEME

Ah, simplicity. Clean lines, easy to read, understated…just what we desire in our PS3 themes. A version with a white background is available, too, but it blinds our eyes. Also available on the PlayStation Store are similar echochrome wallpapers for your PSP.



▶HIGH VELOCITY BOWLING THEMES 01-03

There exists a line between "edgy" and "juvenile." We're not sure which side of that line High Velocity Bowling's new themes fall on. (Especially theme 01!) The subdued colors, eye-catching icons, and hand-penciled style, however, win us over, though we're still not sure whether to be offended by what surely has to be parody.

DEPT. OF NOT DOLLS

LABOR OF LOVE

Three PTOM readers share their passion for creating custom figurines

A group shot of Kyle Robinson's lovingly crafted figurines.

Mike Amos says, "Resourcefulness is important for a customizer! I try to innovate as much as I can."

Jin Saotome's Iron Man has a Cobra Commander body, Snake Eyes head, and Storm Shadow hands.

Ever been in love? More importantly, ever been in love with a game? If you have, you might understand why guys like Michael Amos, Kyle Robinson, and Jin Saotome spend hours bent over a desk sculpting, painting, and finely crafting bits of clay and plastic to transform visions of their favorite characters into three-dimensional, posable reality.

But customizing (see Glossary) is more than just a passionate outpouring of adoration—it's an activity that demands resourcefulness and creativity. It's a hobby that teaches lessons in patience and rewards those who participate with the satisfaction of knowing they've crafted an object that's totally unique.

All it takes to get started is some basic supplies, a hefty dose of determination, and these tips from three talented PTOM readers who craft their own action figures.

Glossary

CUSTOMIZING: The act of creating a custom action figure out of materials found in the big, wide world, often with another action figure as a base.

FODDER: A collection of random action figure parts, like heads or limbs.

SCULPT: Shaping clay with various tools.

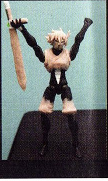
CURE: To let clay harden, which requires time and sometimes boiling water.

Do it like this...

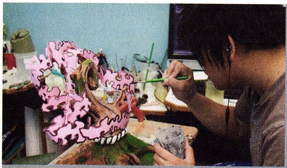
① Mike Amos created a figure of Strider Hiryu specifically to detail the customizing process for PTOM. He began with an 8.5-inch Spiderman action figure that he found on sale at Target.

② "It's good practice to wash your figure first. Factories often leave a waxy layer that can make it hard for paint or clay to stick. A nice, hot soapy bath usually does the trick."

③ "What I'm doing here is filing down the joints where the figure pivots and bends. These could later become problem areas because of paint rubbing off when moving the limbs."



④ "Here's the figure with clay sculpted on. I used Super Sculpey. You usually have to bake to harden that brand, but I boiled my figure instead. (The oven could potentially melt the figure.)"



Mike says, "I like the challenge of putting as much detail as I can into a figure." Check out his amazing *Okami* figurines (below) to determine if he succeeds.

Mike Amos

Process

"The first thing I do is find a figure with a body type similar to the character I want to make. Afterwards, I try to find good reference pictures. I don't really plan out what I want to do. I just kind of wing it.

I normally start with the head, then work on the upper body and finish up with the lower half of the figure. A lot of other customizers 'bash' figures, meaning they take pieces from different action figures and put them together into one figure, but I don't really bash much. I use the whole body of a figure and sculpt, sand, or shave down until I get the look I want."

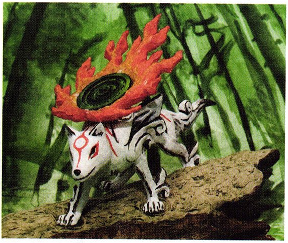
Worst Mistake

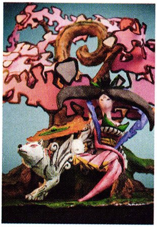
"The biggest mess-up that gives all customizers a headache is the joint paint rub, where the paint rubs off at the figure joints when you move the arms and legs around. There are several ways to fix this. I either sand down the joints, allowing a layer of paint to stick, or apply a little super glue. The super glue method is really tricky. I actually put off a project once because I used the super glue method and didn't move the joint around long enough for the glue to dry. It got stuck and I ended up breaking off the arm…ouch. So that figure was thrown into the fodder box until I can find a good use for it."

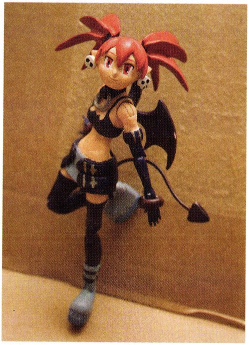
Visit somatic-studios.com/kustomgallery to see more of Mike's work.

MIKE'S TOOLBOX

- hobby knife
- sandpaper
- hobby files (even nail files can work)
- rotary tool like Dremel (for carving, sanding, and shaping)
- super glue
- heat gun/ hair dryer
- clay
- pot of boiling water (for the Super Sculpey clay)
- sculpting tools (even toothpicks work)
- paint brushes
- acrylic paint





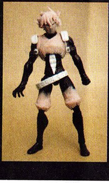


Tricks of the Trade

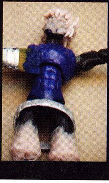
MIKE: "A good way to start is to give the figure a hot bubble bath to wash away any kind of coating or film that might have been put on the figure during the manufacturing process. Doing so helps paint stick better to the parts."

JIN: "Everyone is selling loose action figure 'lots' and you can often pick up a bunch of them for cheap. I'll even hit garage sales because parents are always getting rid of their children's old toys, and you can even find vintage stuff."

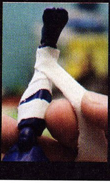
KYLE: "The only way to get Apoxie Sculpt is online. Go to www.avesstudio.com and snag the 1 lb. kit for about $17 shipped. It will last you a long time."



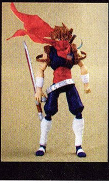
⑤ "The belt and harness were made with strips of plastic that I cut up from the toy packaging. The details were sculpted on using Aves Apoxie."



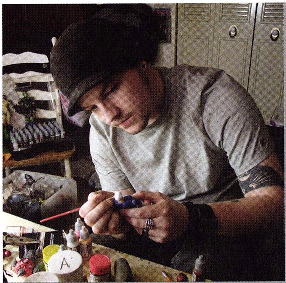
⑥ "Now, carefully apply the paint and set the figure aside to dry."



⑦ "I cut strips from an old shirt to make the white bandages and glued it on with superglue. The red scarf and waistband are ribbons with wire in it, purchased at a local fabric store."



⑧ "Ta da! Striker Hiryu is complete!" Mike made the figure in less than four days. Thanks for the demo, Mike! Great work!



While Kyle already makes a living customizing, he says he would love to work on a planning and design team for a major toy company.

KYLE'S TOOLBOX

- Apoxie Sculpt by Aves Studio
- Game Color Acrylics by Vallejo
- Dremel stylus
- Massive collection of base figures and various limbs

Kyle Robinson

Process

"My basic steps are pretty much the same every time now (like clockwork).

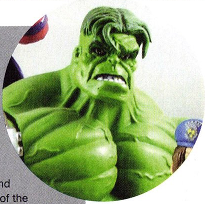
First, I piece together the basic base figure (as in finding the head, body, and other limbs). Then, if I need to do any sanding with my Dremel, I get that out of the way. The sanding usually involves things like removing unwanted hair, clothing wrinkles, and other features on the base figure that won't be on the custom. I also sand all the joints a bit—this reduces paint rub on the joints in the long run.

Then I'm ready to sculpt, but I wash my figure beforehand with dish soap and warm water and an old toothbrush (this removes sanding dust to allow the sculpture to realize its full potential).

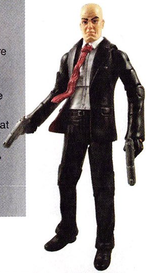
After letting the Apoxie Sculpt cure for about 24 hours, I wash the figure again before painting. Then, I paint the figure and it's done. There are many different paint techniques, such as paint washing, dry-brushing, etc. Each custom figure does take a lot of planning, but when you've been doing it as long as I have, you develop a good eye for what will work and planning becomes second nature. It's just part of the game."

Worst Mistake

"Aw, man, I've done it all, from breaking figures beyond repair to spilling paint all over a finished product. But the saddest thing that ever happened was when I made a custom figure for ToyFare magazine. I needed to make a last-minute adjustment to the neck. To do this, I had to remove the head, and while doing so, I broke the neck so completely that I couldn't put the head back on. The figure was completely done, too, so the only thing I could do was find a new torso from the same figure and start all over."



Some projects (like simple repaints) take mere hours to complete; more intricate projects can take weeks.

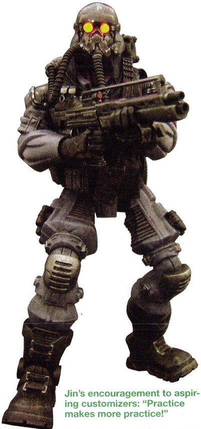


Visit www.kylerobinsoncustoms.com for more of Kyle's work.

The Customizing Community

Intrigued? Consider the sites below as a gateway into the vast realm of customizers and their projects.

www.thetoysoup.com
www.figurerealm.com/Home.php



Jin's encouragement to aspiring customizers: "Practice makes more practice!"

JIN'S TOOLBOX

- Apoxie Sculpt by Aves Studio
- Future Glue
- 3M sandpaper of various grades
- plain styrene
- shetting
- 2-part Epoxy Gel
- paints

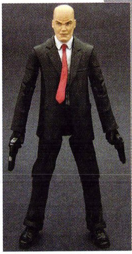
Jin Saotome

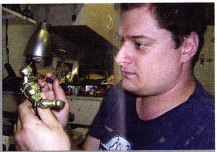
(a.k.a. John Mallamas)

Process

"In a nutshell, I design (think about the character, parts, raw materials, and if it's even possible to create them); parts-swap (combine parts from other base figures to form the rough design…head, legs, arms, the body, and anything else that makes up the underform); sculpt (start sculpting armor, straps, additional clothing, or muscle features); work on additions (glue on any pouches, straps, weapons, hoses, wires, and all the small detail that makes that character unique); and lastly, paint.

I do all the planning necessary by looking up figures online, laying out possible candidates from my parts bins, and then hit town to buy raw materials. Sometimes that takes a day, sometimes that takes years, like when I was searching for the perfect bendable tentacles for my Marvel Shuma Gorath character."





Often called the "Customizing MacGyver," Jin uses anything and everything in his creations, including "craft lace, cell phone straps, clear plastic flatware, giant pens, scrapbook rivets, and book lights."

Worst Mistake

"Probably the first time I tried to use enamel paint on a figure. Here's a tip: enamel and soft plastics do not mix! The custom was ruined and stayed sticky forever, eventually releasing some noxious gasses that gave me headaches. Or it might have been the time I attempted to make a Ghost Rider with a flaming metal skull by installing parts from a Zippo lighter inside the figure. Lighter fluid, plastic figure, flame…let's just say it wasn't a success."

Visit www.jinsaotomesdangeroustoys.com to see more of Jin's work, including some detailed guides on customizing techniques.

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▸▸This is the brand new, premier, next-gen game links site, built for the community by the community. FileRadar puts the true power of game file distribution into your hands.

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.GAME LINKS.EVOLVED

Letters Feedback, Insight, Bad Grammar, and the Escalating Cost of Living

ASK KRATOS

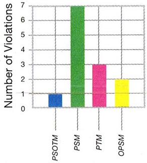
Do you have any information on the release of PlayStation Home? Ever since we got our PS3 I've been looking forward to its release and it's driving me mad.
Bryce J. Nesseth, via email

You speak of madness, but you cannot comprehend TRUE MADNESS like I have suffered. For 10 long years I have SERVED the gods, and the NIGHTMARES of my vile deeds still haunt me. I wait and I serve, and I wait and I serve, yet NEVER will I be free from the BURDEN of my own sins! Cruel gods, you shall PAY for toying with me!! One day I will be free...and when I am, I will answer Bryce's question—just like I will answer the gods for BETRAYING me!!

Next-gen	Last-gen
PARKOUR	BULLET-TIME
OLD AGE	YOUTH
FREE MODES	LEVEL EDITORS
PRINNIES	CHOCOBOS

It's really not that confusing...

For some reason, our initials have managed to flummox our readership. Following are the most common (and most interesting) incorrect acronyms in this month's emailbox.



MATURE CONTENT?

NOW I AM GONNA JUST SPEAK MY MIND AND YOU ALL CAN CHIME IN ON THIS MATTER LATER. THERE ARE A SMALL FEW OF KIDS (UNDER 18) THAT BUY THERE OWN GAMES & SYSTEMS...I MEAN SMALL. I AM 31 AND I HAVE BEEN BUYING ALL OF MY GAMES & SYSTEMS SINCE I TRADED MY NINTENDO FOR A SUPER NINTENDO. I WORKED, WORKED HARD & GOT WHAT I WANTED. MOST KIDS NOW DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT HARD WORK IS... ITS JUST WHERE IS MOM & DAD AT.

NOW WAL-MART, BEST BUY & TARGET WANT 2 ACT LIKE GAMES THAT ARE "AO" ARE GOING 2 NOT SELL....B.S. I AM WAITING FOR A COMPANY 2 RELEASE AN "ADULTS ONLY" GAME AND SELL IT ON IT'S WEBSITE. THEY WOULD MAKE A KILLING & I KNOW THEY WOULD. IF ROCKSTAR SOLD THE AO VERSION OF MANHUNT 2 ONLINE OR AN AO GRAND THEFT AUTO...WOW!! THEY WOULD MAKE CRAZY LOOT, CAUSE I KNOW I WOULD RATHER HAVE THE ADULT ONLY VERSION THEN THE MATURE. THEN WHEN THIS HAPPENS & THE BOX STORES DON'T GET THE SALES FROM THAT BIG TITLE ANYMORE. THAT IS WHEN THEY WILL START 2 SWITCH THINGS UP. CAUSE THEY ARE GONNA B MISSING THAT MONEY COMING IN FROM US...ADULTS ONLY!!
-MGDZA-, via email

WUT UP, -MGDZA-! WE TOTALLY HERE YOU BECAUSE WE ARE ALSO 31 AND WE DRIVE CARS AND BUY BEER AND EVERYTHING. OH MAN... KIDS THESE DAYS, RIGHT? ANYWAY, WE THINK ITS B.S., THE POLITICIANS DONT WANT US TO HAVE BOOBIES AND THINGS LIKE THAT...BUT AN "AO" GAME WOULD MAKE MAD CASH, WE WOULD BUY IT ALL THE TIME. BECAUSE WE'RE 31!! WE'RE TOTALLY NOT 13 AND WE'RE TOTALLY NOT USING OUR DADDY'S EMAIL CUZ WE WORK HARD AND WE DESERVE GAMES FOR ADULTS SINCE WE'RE GROWN UPS AND OUR MATURE TASTES DEMAND AN "ADULT" GAME 2 PLAY RIGHT NOW, SO LISTEN UP ROCKSTAR AND MAKE IT AO RIGHT NOW!!

CRITICAL ABUSE

I have refrained from sending this email for some time now. I know that the folks handing out the reviews might at times have vested interest and I take all reviews with a grain of salt. But here of late you guys (and gal) have got plum carried away with your rating system, and after your *GTA IV* review (which came right after the *Dark Sector* review) I have found myself utterly dumbfounded on how you go about handing out your "stars." I can imagine what

LETTER OF THE MONTH

INFLATED VALUE

Chris Martinez's letter on page 94 [June 2008], "The Greatest Generation," got me to thinking about the cost of videogames. Chris says that he's not willing to pay the extra cost for a next-gen videogame, and considered the cost of PlayStation 2 games to be fair. I think it's worth noting that $40 in 2000 (the year the PS2 was introduced) has the same buying power as $49.60 today, and $50 in 2000 is equal to $62 today, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' inflation calculator.

Even so, there are plenty of PS3 games that have dropped to $40 new, not to mention used or downloadable games that cost less. Just some more food for thought: *Warhawk*—in my opinion a champion of gaming advancement—is currently $30 on PSN, $24.19 in 2000 dollars. And Teresa, your beloved *PixelJunk Monsters* would be about $6.50 if you bought it in 2000 dollars when it first came out. One more fun fact: a PS1 at launch in 1995 would cost $420 in 2008 dollars.
Ben Russert, via email

PIXELJUNK
22

Great games (like *PixelJunk Monsters*) are indeed getting cheaper, when you adjust for inflation.

Thanks for the economic analysis, Ben. It's a great point—games truly are cheaper today when you adjust for inflation. Also, thanks for the link you included in your email (http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl). Everyone was having a boffo time playing around with various numbers until old-timers Rob, Gary, and Roger made the colossal mistake of plugging in their current salaries to see how they compare with what they were making when they started in this industry. And just like console games, all three are cheaper today when you adjust them for inflation. Poor chaps...

developers and publishers think of you guys: "I hope PTOM has plenty of subscribers because it's easy as pie to get a good review with them." Talk about the friendliest critics in the industry. I have even read reviews where you would write as if the game blew chunks, then turn right around and copy-and-paste four stars for the game in question. Which leaves me with the WTF feeling.

I now am scared to even read the reviews. Come on fellas, you gotta put your *Siskel and Ebert* hats on and gives these developers criticism hell.

Okay, I will go on about my day, and take out the rest of my review anger on my wife and kids...
IrishManiac, via email

Wow. We knew our readers were passionate—but seriously, IrishManiac? We're fine with you disagreeing with our scores; that's part of the fun of reading a review. We also stand by our opinions...our very educated, very refined opinions, thank you very much. And we like to add that we most assuredly aren't swayed by any of these nebulous, nefarious "vested interests" you've mentioned. As for *GTA IV*, have you seen any of the other reviews out there? Just about everyone in the business—both print and online—gave it the highest score on their respective scales, but very few of them spoke out to the extent that we did about several key concerns with the game, including some serious flaws with the story and the characters. Perhaps you'd like to read the text before you're dazzled by the pretty stars at the end of the page...

So go ahead and disagree with us. We can handle it. Just promise us you'll take it easy on Mrs. Maniac and the kids!

MORE LIBERTY, PLEASE

I love the magazine and I trust you for information regarding the PS3. After reading about how Microsoft scored the episode packs for their version of *GTA IV*, I was wondering if we loyal followers of Sony will get any episode packs, too?
David Hughes, via email

Our Magic 8-Ball says: You can bet on it. While we have no official word from either SCEA or Rockstar, there's no way loyal PS3 gamers will be left swinging in the Liberty City wind. When, what, how, and where? We'd be purely guessing, but you can be sure we'll get something, sometime, and maybe even soon.

BLAME JAR JAR

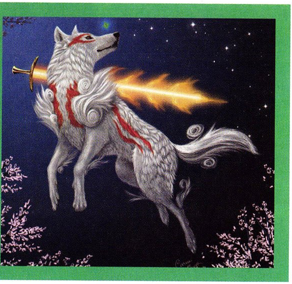
I have two questions: First, have you guys heard if the *Star Wars* movies are going to come to Blu-ray? My second question has to do with *Assassin's Creed*: I bought it when it first came out and it was full of bugs and would not play right. I went on the internet to find that many other people had the same problem. I traded it in for *Uncharted* (one of the best games ever), but I would like to buy it again. Are they planning to release a fixed version of the game?
Brandon Crossland, via email

Star Wars on Blu-ray? You mean the original trilogy, right? We'd pay top dollar (again) for that re-release but probably only bottom dollar for the prequels. We're sure it will happen in a fanfare of re-release craziness, just like we're sure the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *Indiana Jones* movies will make their way to 1080p crispness eventually.

As for *Assassin's Creed*, a downloadable patch was available fairly soon after release that fixed some of the texture tearing issues. So long as your PS3 is online you'll be able to get the fix you need.

FAN ART

Amaterasu
from *Okami*



Carrie Best must have had a Celestial Brush in her talented hands when she drew this gorgeous pic of Ammy! Check out www.carriebest.com for more of her art.

contact Send your thoughts and comments to PTOM_letters@futureus.com. Because, frankly, we get a little sad and lonely when you don't write.

POP QUIZ

No. 2 pencils ready? OK, begin.

1. Who plays the voice of Scorpion in the *Mortal Kombat* games and movies?
a) Ed Boon
b) Steve Beran
c) David Hayter
d) John Vogel

2. The inspiration for the aliens in *Space Invaders* comes from:
a) *Starship Troopers*
b) *The Day of the Triffids*
c) *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*
d) *The War of the Worlds*

3. Capcom has released games starting with every letter of the alphabet except:
a) F
b) I
c) Q
d) Y

4. Audi has won the 24 Hours of Le Mans seven times. How many victories were in the R10 TDI featured in *GRID?*
a) 1
b) 2
c) 3
d) 6

5. For which toy was the term "action figure" coined?
a) Darth Vader
b) Henshin Cyborg-1
c) Megaman
d) G.I. Joe

6. What was the Incredible Hulk's original color?
a) Green
b) Blue
c) Gray
d) Tan

7. Which game does not have an anime series out in the U.S.?
a) *Valkyria Chronicles*
b) *Disgaea*
c) *Naruto*
d) *Devil May Cry*

8. Which James Bond actor was the first to lend his voice to a Bond game?
a) Sean Connery
b) Roger Moore
c) Timothy Dalton
d) Pierce Brosnan

9. Which following elefact is false?
a) Elephants communicate over long distances with sub-sonic rumblings
b) Some elephants have been trained to paint self-portraits
c) When a baby elephant is born, it spends the first few months atop its mother's back
d) Elephants not only hear through their ears but also through their trunks and feet

10. In the original *Bionic Commando*, the main character cannot:
a) Walk
b) Jump
c) Shoot
d) Duck

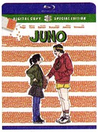
Answers: 1.a; 2.d; 3.b; 4.b; 5.d; 6.c; 7.a; 8.d; 9.c; 10.b

PlayStation POV

PTOM's PS3 Progress Report

It's been a little over a year and a half since the PlayStation 3's release: enough time to give fans a peek at the machine's potential, but not yet enough to predict the system's ultimate status in the realm of gaming history. In this time, there have been triumphs. But it's also clear that there's work still to be done.

We figure it's the perfect moment for a dose of critical analysis about the platform's performance, so the PTOM staff—Rob, Gary, Roger, Ken, Teresa, and Scott—sat down to discuss what the PS3 has accomplished in its first eighteen months...and what it still has left to do.



☒ Rediscover Rumble

While Sixaxis motion-sensing has its uses, shipping the PS3 without any sort of rumble was disappointing. Fortunately, it was quickly rectified with the release of the DualShock 3. PS3 owners now have access to both motion-sensing and rumble effects. Better late than never, and better both than neither.

☒ Win the next-gen DVD Format War

The PS3 isn't just a gaming system—it's also a High Definition movie player. Now that Blu-ray has squashed HD DVD, we'd chalk this one up as a resounding victory.

☒ Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

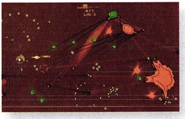
A title so deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of PlayStation fans, it doesn't even need a verb to introduce it. *MGS4* was a system seller before it was even finished—we played it, we loved it, and it will grace the PS3's list of greatest accomplishments for years to come.

⧄ Integrate PS3 to PSP Connectivity

With current PS3 to PSP remote play capabilities, you can already browse the PS Store with your PSP when you're away from home and command your PS3 to download the demos you want. You can also purchase games for your PSP via your PS3. You can also access music, videos, photos, and the friends list on your PS3 using your PSP. But we have one more request: we want to play PSP mini-versions of our PS3 titles! They can be identical to the PS3 version or supplemental.

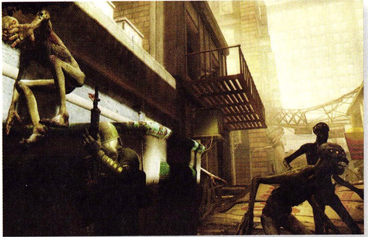
⧄ Perfect the PlayStation Network

The PlayStation Store's user-friendly redesign is a huge step in the right direction, as is the steadily growing list of original titles *(Everyday Shooter, echochrome, PixelJunk Monsters).* What we desire now are better classic titles (we'd love to see *Metal Gear Solid* or *Final Fantasy VII* available for download), a better way to acquire music (the *SingStar* route doesn't have the universal appeal or functionality we'd appreciate), and a means to stream full-length movies on demand. Oh, and access to an in-game XMB would be much appreciated.



☐ Finish and Release HOME

To launch PS3 owners into the much-touted and eagerly awaited sphere of PlayStation social networking, HOME will first need to, well, launch itself.



Following the success of the original *Resistance: Fall of Man* (along with other strong first-party games, *Uncharted, MotorStorm,* etc.) comes *Resistance 2.*

☐ Dominate the Exclusives Market

To keep up with the competition, the PS3 needs to increase its library of third-party exclusives. A hefty list of first-party titles is already lined up for later this year—*Resistance 2, MotorStorm: Pacific Rift, LittleBigPlanet*—but we'd really like to see more commitment from third-party sources supporting the platform exclusively. We have to look to currently obscure titles like Quantic Dreams' *Heavy Rain* (still to be published by SCEA) to lead the charge, and it would be comforting for PS3 gamers to see more options.

☐ Diversify Genres

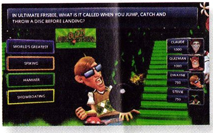
Where are all the RPGs? The strategy titles? The simulations? The puzzle games? We know the PS3 can succeed in shooters and driving titles, but we'd love to see the system tackle a greater variety of genres.

☐ Enter the MMORPG Arena

Now that Sony Online Entertainment is officially part of the Sony Computer Entertainment family, we want to see even more PS3 MMORPGs. SOE's spy thriller, *The Agency,* is on its way, and in a recent interview with us, SOE President John Smedley hinted that *EverQuest* was not finished...and we choose to read into that suggestion that it may be revived on PS3. MMOs are the biggest growth area in gaming, and we hope PS3 is part of that wave.

☐ Court the Casual Gamer

To tap into the casual market, we believe the price of the PS3 would have to drop. And with that drop we'd love to see more customizable options—color choice sells (just look at the variety of PSP colors).


IN ULTIMATE FRISBEE, WHAT IS IT CALLED WHEN YOU JUMP, CATCH AND THROW A DISC BEFORE LANDING?
WORLD'S GREATEST
SPIKING
HAMMER
SHOWBOATING
CLAUDE 1000
QUIZMAN 1000
DWAYNE 750
STEVIE 750

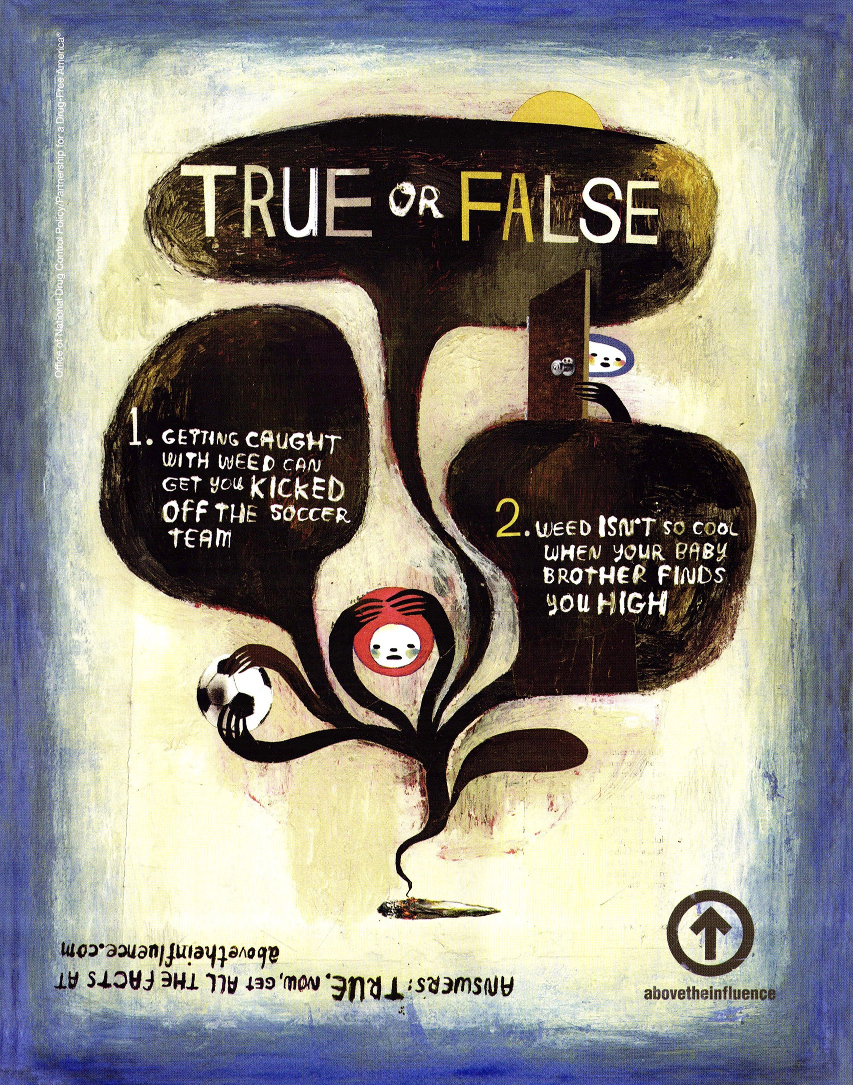
Next month

In PlayStation: The Official Magazine

Game publishers are busy readying their big Holiday releases, and in a blowout preview section we'll be going hands-on with most of the big games on their way to PlayStation 3.

On the review slate, we'll be running the PTOM rule over *Soulcalibur IV* and more.

Plus, the long-awaited release of *Metal Gear Solid 4* ensures we'll be spending the next month online. We'll call it work and bring you top tips for playing online.


TRUE OR FALSE
1. GETTING CAUGHT WITH WEED CAN GET YOU KICKED OFF THE SOCCER TEAM
2. WEED ISN'T SO COOL WHEN YOUR BABY BROTHER FINDS YOU HIGH
ANSWERS: TRUE, NOW, GET ALL THE FACTS AT abovetheinfluence.com
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Not Rated by the ESRB

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